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The Pandemic as a Portal: On Transformative Ruptures and Possible Futures for Education

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The Pandemic as a Portal: On Transformative Ruptures and Possible Futures for Education

Introduction

Mariana Souto-Manning

Contributions

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Introduction

The Pandemic as a Portal: On Transformative Ruptures and Possible Futures for Education

Mariana Souto-Manning

In 2020, as COVID-19 made us pause, it also gave us pause, shedding light on inequities in schooling and society. As Roy (2020) notes, it “brought the world to a halt like nothing else could.” However, the tragic patterns of inequity unfolding before our eyes were not new; we were witnessing “the wreckage of a train that has been careening down the track for years” (para. 8). Inequities that have long existed in Black, Indigenous, and other communities of Color were accentuated by the pandemic, and the exacerbation of these inequities remains devastating in and beyond the United States.

As schools throughout the country and the world closed, I witnessed and even yearned for a return to “normality,” attempting to stitch the future to the past (Roy, 2020). Yet my own yearnings for normality were soon jolted; one could say I came to my senses. Initial short-term closures stretched on for months, and as an Afro-Latina educator, researcher, mother, and engaged citizen, and also as a woman and human being, inspired by Arundhati Roy, I came to realize that “nothing could be worse than a return to normality” (para. 48). After all, normality—in schools and schooling—has long been marked by damage, inequities, and dysfunctionality.

Rather than a return to an idyllic notion of normality, I found myself yearning for a more just future, considering: What if we were to reject a return to an oppressive past marked by harmful practices, pathologizing portrayals, and damaging pedagogies for Black, Indigenous, and other communities of Color? Recognizing that there is more expertise distributed in communities than in any one person—however educated or schooled an individual might be—I turned to researchers, teachers, mothers, and children to imagine education anew, taking up Roy’s invitation to re-envision the pandemic as a portal.

RE-ENVISIONING THE PANDEMIC AS A PORTAL

On April 4, 2020, Roy published an essay entitled “The Pandemic Is a Portal” in *Financial Times*. I was introduced to the essay via [this video](#), published less than two weeks later, and really connected to Roy’s caution against the urge to determine and pursue the future based on our past. She writes: “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next” (para. 49). Acknowledging the damaging “normality” to which she alluded and re-envisioning the pandemic as a metaphorical portal, a site for transformative ruptures, I paused to consider possibilities for reimagining schooling.

I was not the only educator inspired by Roy (2020). Gloria Ladson-Billings (2021) has published an article orienting to Roy’s call. She noted that “the COVID-19 pandemic exposed many of the nation’s vulnerabilities—health care, economic, climate, and educational disparities—and put us all on alert” (p. 68). Issuing a call to action, Ladson-Billings notes the “need to fundamentally rethink education and consider the pandemic as an opportunity to restart, or more precisely re-set, education” (p. 68), reminding us that “normal is a no-no” (p. 69).

We know “normality” has been marked by inequities. I believe that this past of inequities can be best understood through the lens of what Ladson-Billings calls “the education debt” (2006), accumulated over time and comprised of “the foregone schooling resources that we could have (and should have) been investing” in communities of Color (p. 5). Indeed, the many inequities resulting from the mounting education debt owed to Black, Indigenous, and other communities of Color came into sharper focus during the COVID-19 pandemic. These realities are top of mind when we think about why it is urgent and necessary to revisit the well-established but problematic function and dysfunctions of pre-pandemic schooling.

REVISITING THE FUNCTION AND DYSFUNCTIONS OF SCHOOLING

What is the function of schooling? Is it serving its intended purpose? Might we largely agree that schooling is dysfunctional amidst the pervasive miseducation, exclusion, and failing of Black, Indigenous, and other children of Color? Dysfunction, Leigh Patel (2016) reminds us,

does not simply mean bad or that there is a lack of functions in our actions and words. Rather, dysfunctional means that our explicit expressions of function do not match the implicit functions that are actually governing our actions. (p. 30)

As we pause to (re)consider the pandemic as a portal, how might we attend to the possibility that the dysfunction of schooling “supports the maintenance of a more implicit, often damaging, structure” (Patel, 2016, p. 30)? And how do we resist our tendency to hold to what we know as schooling, even if such knowledge and perceived safety are rooted in assimilationist aims and, in fact, detract from transformation?

To avoid walking through the portal occasioned by the rupture between our past and future, “dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas” (Roy, 2020, para. 50), how can we attend to the dysfunctionality of schooling? How can we walk through without seeking to stitch the future of schooling to its damaging past? How can we ready ourselves to imagine schooling anew and to make this imagination a blueprint for the futurity of schooling?

These questions are prescient; after all, schooling has failed to fulfill its professed purpose—to foster learning and cultivate growth, subsumed by commonly-professed (albeit thin) commitments to justice (Patel, 2016). Harnessing our commitment “to disrupt the centuries-long tradition of education as the primary sorting mechanism in society” (p. 30) is predicated on interrupting our complicity with its longstanding function in the enactment of injustice and the reification of racism and related bigotries.

The concept of dysfunctionality helps us understand the impact of schooling on early childhood education; its purported historical roots are dysfunctional. “The dominant historical narrative of early childhood education declares the field to have 1800s ‘European roots’ ... erasing (or at least ignoring) ... early care and education practices in Black, Indigenous, and other communities of Color” (Souto-Manning, 2021, p. 9). This dysfunction is visible today in the harm experienced by Black, Indigenous, and other preschoolers of Color. For example, Black preschool-aged children are suspended and disciplined at racially disproportionate rates (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016). Despite the extent to which norms have reflected constitutional violation, over the decades, the role of schooling in the enactment of segregation grounded in racism and entangled forms and systems of bigotry were very much part of pre-pandemic notions of normality (Khan, 2016).

As I have documented elsewhere, research shows that “children of Color withstand harm in schools via policies and practices specifically designed to protect white interests, yet these same policies and practices that are upholding racist ideologies and grossly inequitable outcome patterns continue to be situated as neutral” (Souto-Manning, 2021, p. 10). The dysfunction of early schooling is illustrated by its strong attachment to “the settled expectations of relative white privilege as a legitimate and natural baseline” (Harris, 1993, p. 1714), against which growth, development, and learning are scaled and rated.

Schooling is serving the function for which it was designed—to sort, assimilate, and devalue the language and cultural practices, as well as the ways of being and knowing, of Black, Indigenous, and other communities of Color. This dysfunctional function, produced and reproduced by “the doomsday machine we have created” (Roy, 2020, para. 48), serves, in the United States, the status quo, rather than prioritizing the humanity, well-being, and possible futures of the growing majority of Black, Indigenous, and other children and families of Color the education system purports to (also) serve.

RACIAL CAPITALISM

The profits and benefits reaped from children, youth, families, and communities of Color can be best understood through the lens of racial capitalism, a theoretical lens that allows us to understand how “white people and predominantly white institutions derive value from nonwhiteness” (Leong, 2013, p. 2154). Although not new, it allows us to attend to how, for example, the marginalized presence of Black, Indigenous, and other children of Color in schooling is in itself “a useful means for white individuals and predominantly white institutions to acquire social and economic benefits while deflecting potential charges of racism and avoiding more difficult questions of racial equality” (p. 2155). Such deployments of racial capitalism ensure and prioritize “racial representation at its thinnest and most tokenistic” (p. 2157) while evading transformation in the pursuit of justice.

Roy (2020) explains:

[U]nlike the flow of capital, this virus seeks proliferation, not profit, and has, therefore, inadvertently, to some extent, reversed the direction of the flow. It has mocked immigration controls, biometrics, digital surveillance and every other kind of data analytics, and struck hardest—thus far—in the richest, most powerful nations of the world, bringing the engine of capitalism to a juddering halt. Temporarily perhaps, but at least long enough for us to examine its parts, make an assessment and decide whether we want to help fix it, or look for a better engine. (para. 5)

Racial capitalism, fueled by the flow of capital, was disrupted, to some extent—even if only temporarily—by the pandemic. The stronghold of testing in college admissions was loosened. Tools for scaling and rating students did not seem as durable as they once had been. Considering that the elimination of SAT and ACT requirements has been shown to lead to more diverse student bodies with no negative outcomes on graduation rates (Syverson et al., 2018), these patterns invite us to imagine new opportunities for change. If we reject the desirability and acceptability of fixing and reestablishing that broken system, we must seize this disruption to racial capitalism as a space for the pandemic to be (re)positioned as a potential transformative rupture (Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017).

THE PANDEMIC AS TRANSFORMATIVE RUPTURE

Transformative rupture involves attending to “those incidents, interactions, experiences, and moments that expose and interrupt pervasive coloniality and structural inequities” (Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017, p. 5). This means that in classrooms, schools, and other educational spaces there needs to be a “sustained creation of small, but significant anticolonial shifts in inequitable practices, discourses, and policies” (p. 5). The “fissures” in oppressive structures (p. 5) are transformative rupture opportunities, which shed light onto possible futures. In this case, COVID-19-related interruptions to flows of capital and racial capitalism brought hardship, harm, and despair, but also offered us an opportunity to rethink schooling, to (re)consider what we might bring with us into a post-pandemic future and what we might leave behind.

The pieces that comprise this special issue of the Bank Street *Occasional Paper Series* offer situated representations of transformative ruptures. They offer insights into practices, experiences, and theories that disrupt commonplace, long-established educational structures. From a variety of vantage points, researchers, teachers, mothers, and young children offer windows into how and why we must “push against the normative practices, policies, cultures, or spaces” of schooling (Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017, p. 87). They illustrate sites of transformative rupture, offering powerful insights into “how disruption of everyday reality can allow educators, scholars, students, and community members to envision and imagine a very different future” (p. 87).

NORTH STAR LOGIC

As Roy reminds us, COVID-19 “holds no moral brief” (2020). Yet as a social phenomenon, this virus demands that we act. I propose that the appropriate actions are not simple practices of personal resistance, but proactive explorations of how Black, Indigenous, and other people of Color, and co-conspirators, as well, may undertake the work and provision of collective liberation (Love, 2019; Shange, 2019).

At times of uncertainty and despair, when we don’t know what to do or how to deal with our anger, fear, and the unexpected, we can be guided by “a North Star logic” (Shange, 2019). A North Star logic rejects pedagogies of expectability that are often conflated with pedagogies of respectability, instead focusing on and enacting a “sociology of potentiality” (Povinelli, 2011, p. 16) that is “embodied in specific social worlds” (p. 14). This is important because the perpetual tension between what is and what might be accomplished—“between striving to persevere and any actual idea or action that emerges from this striving—provides a space for potentiality” (p. 9).

No focus on potentiality is without obstacles: there is “friction produced in the encounter between racialized futures and pasts” (Shange, 2019, p. 65). Despite frictions and tensions between past and future, however, the kind of schooling we need is marked by movement toward freedom and emancipation.

TOWARD FREEDOM AND EMANCIPATION

Stories of potentialities matter, and perhaps their importance is more salient during our most uncertain times. Such stories allow us to explore currents and uncertainties. Some allow us to bring closure to a past of oppression and envision futures of possibility.

Reflecting on Roy’s conceptualization of the pandemic as a portal, in this special issue, stakeholders with various vantage points offer their visions of what lies on the other side of this unprecedented disruption. With the understanding that “nothing could be worse than a return to normality” (Roy, 2020, para. 48), this issue of the Bank Street *Occasional Paper Series* offers insights into possible futures and how we might move to abolish harms enacted in and by schooling as it currently exists.

Looking at possibilities to move toward emancipation and freedom, I invited teacher educators, teachers, parents, and children to help re-envision the pandemic as a portal—seizing the transformative rupture brought about by COVID-19. Contributors were asked to think of the pandemic as a gateway, reflecting on what they want to leave behind and what they will take with them as they commit to moving toward justice in education. As the pandemic broke through the encapsulation of schooling within the physical spaces of school buildings and preschool settings, I sought to capture the perspectives, experiences, and voices of multiple social actors. Whether they were involved in research, teaching, community engagement, mothering, or learning, their pieces serve as windows into the domain of potentiality.

I specifically sought articles that offered critical, humanizing perspectives with a goal of re-envisioning possibilities for schooling post-pandemic that align with the goal of interrupting and transforming a miseducative past (Woodson, 1933). With the understanding that we should not be yearning to return to a past characterized by inequities, injustices, and oppression—combined with the belief that “The Future is Female” (Chmaj, 1979, p. 361)—this issue of the Bank Street *Occasional Paper Series* is authored by an all-girl/womxn cast who brilliantly offers insights into possible futures, considering opportunities to rethink education and abolish the patterns of harm too-often enacted in and by schooling as it currently exists.

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue begins with four articles authored by Black and South East Asian women who describe researchers’ reimaginings of education that center the humanity and ingenuity of Black, Indigenous, and other communities of Color. Boveda and Allen invite us to disrupt isolation by enacting Black feminism and humanizing pedagogy, breaking through neoliberal expectations of the westernized academy. Madkins offers powerful pathways into re-imagining justice-oriented approaches in teacher education via the sustenance of #BlackGirlMagic —“Black girls’ and women’s universal awesomeness and brilliance”— leveraging *Verzuz* as a site of possibility for freedom and emancipation. Rabadi-Raol shows us the need for inhabiting in-between, liminal spaces that rupture well-established borders, illustrating the call for public pedagogical sites of possibility. Madu reflects on her experiences as a Black mother who gave birth to a Black boy during the pandemic, revealing the lessons she learned from Black male early childhood teachers and offering insights into sites of potentiality for Black boys.

Next, the issue turns to 10 teachers who identify as Black, Indigenous, and of Color (Latinx and Asian American), as well as a White co-conspirator ([Move to End Violence, 2016](#)). They reflect on their practices, identities, and priorities through a North Star logic.

These teachers—Bianca Licata and Katherine Cheng Stahl; Julie Orelie-Hernandez, Patricia Pión, and Rafaella Soares-Bailey; Karina Malik; Jessica Martell; Grasilel Diaz; Trisha Moquino and Katie Kitchens—offer visions of a future of transformative ruptures, centering the humanity, ingenuity, values, voices, histories, and priorities of communities who identify as Black, Indigenous, and of Color. Their situated enactments of North Star logic can guide us toward freedom: They insist on recognition of the humanity

of teachers (Licata and Stahl), the need to heal by (re)membering and (re)claiming memories teachers are often told and expected to forget (Orelie-Hernandez, Pión, and Soares-Bailey), the need for ongoing communities to support and sustain teachers of Color (Malik), the suspension of White-aligned notions of trauma-informed practices (Martell), the abolition of the carcerality of early schooling (Diaz), and the cultivation and sustenance of a Pedagogy of Indigenous Love (Moquino and Kitchens). Collectively, they denounce the silencing of Black, Indigenous, and other communities of Color, helping us to acknowledge damages inflicted while inviting us to reorient teaching toward emancipation and freedom.

Recognizing the importance of mothers in the lives of young children and in their care, development, growth, and futures, the next section of this special issue highlights the experiences of four mothers—Abby Emerson, Katie Harlan-Eller, Tara Kirton, and Katherine Rodriguez-Agüero—whose racial identifications are White, Black, and Latina. These four women offer letters to their children, situating the pandemic as a portal toward freedom. They center love, commit to the pursuit of justice, and—amidst uncertainty—embrace the need for transformation.

Discussion of the education, schooling, and futures of young children is incomplete without children's perspectives. In the final section of this issue, five children—Amelia, Fiona, Jojo (Johana), Lela Joy, and Sara—offer their thoughts on what it was like to be schooled during the pandemic. Their work demonstrates that authoring extends to numerous dimensions and modalities beyond letters, words, and other symbols typically associated with literacy in schools and schooling. The photos, audio, videos, and artwork of these five contributors allow us phenomenological insights into childhood during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Hill Collins (1998) reminds us, “still young,” they are “able to come to voice much easier than those of us who have endured years of such silencing” (n.p.).

Amelia's, Fiona's, Jojo's, Lela Joy's, and Sara's voices, images, artwork, and photographed experiences demonstrate the power of the home and of families in young children's education. In addition to urging us to interrogate what and who might be part of a future that is more just and humane, more oriented toward freedom, the children remind us of the many ways humans can make meaning and be authors.

From being a super-shero while teaching her baby brother (Lela Joy); to enjoying computer schooling at home (Sara); to creatively responding to her teacher Mrs. Kim in a (mostly) remote Korean dual immersion kindergarten (Jojo); to exploring science with one of her dads, Baba/爸爸 (Fiona); to talking about starting in-person kindergarten with her *Papi* (Amelia), these young children expand our understandings of schooling amidst the pandemic, inviting us to learn from them as we move forward. Their contributions raise questions such as:

- How might we better attend to siblings and foster intergenerational learning opportunities?
- How might parents be repositioned in the ecology of teaching and learning after the pandemic?
- How might we re-orient schooling to an ethics of familism, collaboration, and interdependence?

I hope you will take the time to listen to their voices, to learn from their experiences, and to witness the power of their insights. They are our North Stars. As Eagleton (1990) underscored, young children

make the best theorists, since they have not been educated into accepting our routine social practices as 'natural' Since they do not yet grasp our social practices as inevitable, they do not see why we might not do things differently. (p. 34)

It is from this understanding that I invite you to engage with their stories.

Telling stories that orient to a North Star logic, the researchers, teachers, parents, and children who contributed to this issue take up Arundhati Roy's conceptualization of the pandemic as a portal. The authors in this special issue craft a liminal space to imagine futures aligned with the pursuit of justice and possibilities for abolishing systems of oppression, exclusion, and inequality. They reflect on what they will leave behind and what they will take with them as they commit to moving toward justice in education. My hope is that, together, the articles and contributions that comprise this special issue may lead us to reimagine education in the pursuit of equity, freedom, emancipation, and justice.

I hope that as you read, you heed Alice Walker's (1989/2010, p. 236) words:

Keep in mind always the present you are constructing. It should be the future you want.

May we—educators, parents, citizens, human beings—recognize the potentiality of the pandemic as a transformative rupture. In doing so, may we recommit to the pursuit of justice in the present we are constructing ... toward the future we want and our children deserve.

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Mariana Souto-Manning, PhD, is the fifth President of Erikson Institute in Chicago, Illinois. Souto-Manning has served as professor of education at Teachers College, Columbia University and has held academic appointments at the University of Iceland and King’s College London. Souto-Manning is committed to the pursuit of justice in early childhood teaching and teacher education, and her research (re)centers methodologies and pedagogies on the lives, values, and experiences of intersectionally minoritized people of Color. As she problematizes issues of colonization, assimilation, and oppression in schooling and society, Souto-Manning critically examines theoretical and methodological issues and dilemmas of doing research with communities of Color, considering questions such as “critical for whom?” and “according to whom?” Souto-Manning (co-)authored 10 books, dozens of book chapters, and over 80 peer-reviewed articles. She has received a number of research awards, including the American Educational Research Association Division K Innovations in Research on Diversity in Teacher Education Award. Follow her on Twitter at @SoutoManning.

Remote Portals: Enacting Black Feminisms and Humanization to Disrupt Isolation in Teacher Education

Mildred Boveda and Keisha McIntosh Allen

Since 2020, a group of Black scholars affiliated with US colleges of education across four time zones have logged into Zoom for writing sessions. Each morning, the on-screen video images have displayed a range of colorful bonnets, head wraps, T-shirts, and lipsticks donned by Afro-diasporic women. We developed a routine for checking in, writing for 30 to 45 minutes, taking breaks, and repeating this cycle for two hours. During breaks, we not only rested from productivity, but also shared tips like which earrings to wear to events and which podcasts affirmed Black women. We discussed the different challenges we faced as we managed family members falling ill during the COVID-19 pandemic, attempted to meet the needs of the students and teachers in our lives, and followed the activism happening within our individual regions of the country. An improvisational decision to come together in the midst of a global crisis became an intellectual community where we continually support one another.

Affectionately described as “Homeroom”—an allusion to the P-12 schools where we once taught—this Black and womanist space grew to include a dozen scholars. It began in April when Boveda asked Allen if she wanted to join her for morning writing. The two of us, teacher educators and married mothers in heteronormative relationships, needed dedicated time for our scholarship. Our research focuses on preparing educators to teach multiply-marginalized students (Boveda in special education and Allen in urban education contexts). Before COVID-19, we sought culturally situated and community-embedded ways of being in community with like-minded scholars. As the pandemic continued, we invited others who shared this desire. Given that many of us were mothers monitoring our children’s virtual schooling, there were times our children also appeared on screen. Together, we named how we exhausted ourselves meeting the demands of neoliberal (Au, 2017) and westernized (Grosfoguel, 2013) university-based teacher education programs. The restrictions posed during the pandemic slowed us down from the daily pace we kept as we fulfilled multiple roles both within and outside the university.

The deceleration we experienced offered an opportunity to analyze the scope of inconsistencies involved in researching and doing teacher education. We articulated the isolation that education scholars who center marginalized children and families experience, even while researching and teaching in programs that market themselves as focused on equity and inclusion. Coming together, we realized how, long before COVID-19, we were already “socially” and “intellectually” isolated given our positionalities as Black women scholars concerned about how teacher education contributes to disparities in P-12 student experiences. We had participated in virtual spaces dedicated to Black women’s wellness (e.g., [GirlTrek](#)) and followed online discussions about the challenges of academia (e.g., [Cite Black Women](#)). Homeroom, however, was distinct. We specifically brought together Black women in colleges of education. The morning sessions functioned as remote portals to each other’s experiences across institutions and homes.

In this essay, we draw from intersectionality as informed by Black feminism (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989), James's (2016) notion of the captive maternal, and Freire's (1970) conceptualization of humanization to elucidate several tensions we have encountered as Black teacher education researchers. Between (a) the commitment we have to accessibility for all P-12 students, including students with disabilities, emergent bilinguals, and historically marginalized populations and (b) the resistance we feel toward the elitist incentive structures within predominantly white institutions, we name what has isolated us prior to the pandemic. Moving forward, we no longer wish to be complicit in our own dehumanization—nor that of the students and families we prepare teachers to serve. By leveraging our experiences as Black women scholars, we make sense of these challenges. We identify how those of us in teacher education who embody multiple marginalities, like canaries that warned coal miners of environmental toxins, are especially attuned to and affected by the toxicity these tensions produce (see Figure 1). We conclude with a list of ethical considerations for those engaged in equity-based teacher education research (e.g., special education, urban education).



Figure 1. Black women teacher educators' imaginings of the miner's canary

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Our analysis is anchored by three concepts that coalesce to reveal the challenges we face as Black women in the westernized university and as researchers of equity-based teacher education. With an emphasis on multiple and interlocking systems of oppression (e.g., ableism, classism, racism, sexism, white supremacy) and a focus on the ways markers of differences matter in how individuals experience ableist, imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 1994), intersectionality as conceptualized by Black feminist theorists underscores the structural conditions that shape our work. That is, we not only examine how P-12 schools and/or institutions of higher education (IHEs) are implicated in the marginalization of students at the intersections of race, gender, class, ability, and other(ed) sociocultural

categories, but also indicate our heightened intersectional consciousness as Black women studying educational inequities (Boveda, 2019).

The second construct, captive maternals, serves to describe (a) who functions within teacher education research, as both the sustainers and the exploited of the field, and (b) why they persist despite an awareness of these dynamics. The captive maternal—a figure of any gender who has been “feminized into caretaking and consumption” (James, 2016, p. 255)—is compatible with Collins’s (2000) focus on intersectionality and the matrix of domination. Collins noted that each individual “derives varying penalties and privileges from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone’s lives” (p. 248). James (2016) explained that “to better understand the meaning of Captive Maternals requires context” (p. 255). James articulated how the West created a “womb” that reductively uses Black bodies to further Western ideology. In addition to supporting knowledge systems advanced through the westernized university, the intersectional matrix of domination creates conditions that produce varied captive maternals. That is, captive maternals differ in social standing, from incarcerated people to university faculty. We offer our narratives to explore how Black women teacher education researchers committed to equitable outcomes for multiply-marginalized youth embody the four qualities of captive maternals:

nontransferable agency; combative peer relations, usually with privileged males; a radical vision for life without trauma; and the desire and capacity to “love” through familial and communal ties that cross boundaries and sustain freedom. (James, 2015, p. 185)

The third concept, *humanization*, serves as both an organizing thought for this essay and an intervention in response to the central question: *What are we refusing to return to post-COVID-19 as we move forward as equity-based teacher education researchers?* We are committed to preparing teachers to recognize and build upon the brilliance of all children. We simultaneously contend with the isolating and dehumanizing pacing of the westernized academy that obligates us to prioritize production and the prestige of institutions over the consequential work involved in teaching and service. Although it is intellectually rigorous work to, for example, engage preservice teachers in unpacking and remedying oppressive educational practices or to mentor emerging researchers to practice ethical inquiry, those efforts are not incentivized at research-intensive institutions as much as publishing and generating grants are. We employ Freire’s (1970) notion of humanization—that is, the vocation of asserting one’s humanity by engaging reason to name and transform the world around oneself—to disrupt the conditions that create the temporal agency and toxicity that Black women in teacher education have learned to navigate. The weight of disrupting oppression may subsume captive maternals. We thus turn to humanization to pursue liberation in agentic ways that restore, are rooted in love, and generate humanizing futures.

PORTALS AS METHOD: IMPROVISED APPROACHES EMPLOYED DURING A PANDEMIC

Roy’s (2020) invocation of pandemics as portals resonates with our use of web services to access and understand each other’s experiences during these perilous times. Teacher education happens across multiple contexts, with distinct licensure requirements that shape foci on equity and the general substance of teacher preparation programs (Au, 2017; Blanton et al., 2017). “The labor of teacher educators has become hyper-regulated as professors of education end up falling into line with state and federal mandates because they want their students to earn their teaching credentials” (Au, 2017, pp. 283–284). Regardless of state-specific demands on our labor, our decision to meet and sustain our

scholarship afforded us a unique opportunity to learn about the educational contexts informing each other's research agendas. In that way, COVID-19—coupled with the improvised remote gatherings we enacted to resist social isolation—served as a portal to understanding multiple context-specific challenges.

We also enact portals as method by inviting readers to examine our two distinctive, yet interconnected, narratives. Critiquing one's field is a risky venture, especially for tenure-earning faculty; it is thus critical to move and work collectively to carry out these agendas (see Phillip et al., 2019). Our use of narratives as portals aligns with the work of prior collectives (e.g., Arizona Group et al., 1996) and women of Color teacher educators (e.g., Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Prieto & Villenas, 2012) who presented multi-voice analyses of tensions encountered in this work. The especially destructive blow COVID-19 dealt to Black communities, moreover, pushed us toward a more focused, Black feminist, and captive-maternal-informed analysis of teacher education. For us, mothers of children enrolled in public schools, research about multiply-marginalized students is not merely a professional or academic exercise; we study and theorize about dynamics that are consequential to our daily lives. As such, our critique of and offering to teacher education come from a place of love and desire for liberation.

In our narratives, we highlight intersectionality, characteristics of captive maternals, and the need for humanization. Boveda underscores how captive maternals in teacher education paradoxically sustain Western ideology, embody nontransferable agency, and experience contentious peer relations. Allen emphasizes a radical vision of life without trauma and a commitment to love through familial and communal bonds.

TEACHER EDUCATION'S CAPTIVE MATERNALS

At 19, I (Boveda) read Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and felt compelled to become a teacher. I was a student at Dartmouth College and expressed the incompatibility between its prestige and the marginalization encountered by Black and Brown P-12 students overrepresented in special education. Similarly, throughout various stages of my academic and professional trajectory, I repeatedly named my unease with how elite institutions "granted me access to theorists who name critical pedagogy and intersectionality, while simultaneously exacerbating constraints I mitigated as a Black woman with familial ties to the Global South" (Boveda, 2019). The 2020 pandemic stilled me enough to process how now, as a faculty member affiliated with a research-intensive school of education, I embody these paradoxes.

As I discursively reject ableism and affirm the value of all students, regardless of their cognitive, functional, or behavioral abilities, I perform for institutions that consistently rank, critique, and question the merit of its emerging—even established—scholars' ideas and intellectual contributions. I cite Black feminism and critique neoliberal institutions, yet recruit women and young people of Color to participate in institutions built upon the exploitation and exclusion of women and Black and Indigenous people (Grosfoguel, 2013); more specifically, I recruit them to colleges of education that have repeatedly been referred to as "cash cows" for universities (e.g., Hartlep et al., 2015). While I write about the importance of acknowledging my Dominican heritage and of de/colonizing teacher education, I understand my nontransferable agency as a Western-trained US citizen who writes in English. That is, I reluctantly contribute to the epistemic hegemony I lamented when I first encountered Freire.

These epistemic frictions nagged me for some time, yet came to a head as I witnessed how much more relaxed my children were when they were physically distant from high school. Although they expressed missing their classmates, they were less stressed than they were prior to pandemic-related school closures. Before moving to Arizona for my current academic position, my children attended schools in Miami, Florida with mostly Black and Latinx educators. Speaking to a *New York Times* reporter, my daughter once expressed her surprise at encounters with teachers' racialized low expectations. My son described the microaggressions his **overwhelmingly white teachers** enacted, a dynamic I recognized from my work with preservice teachers. My research within a predominantly white field reminds me of the entrenched and deficit-based ideologies embedded in educators' preparation. My children's frustrations remind me why I cannot become complicit.

I have not evaded the demonstrable fact that women and people of Color are given lower teaching evaluations than their white male colleagues (Chávez & Mitchell, 2020). To complicate these contentious dynamics, I teach courses that, because they emphasize the needs of students with disabilities and emerging bilinguals, are framed as "controversial." More seasoned faculty know which courses to steer clear of to avoid low student evaluations and the energy student conflicts extract; ironically, and perhaps relatedly, there are preservice teachers who never get the opportunity to study with the most accomplished education experts in their IHEs. I have repeatedly been advised to "be selfish," not stress teaching, and avoid potential conflict. Historically, there has been indirect evidence of grade inflation in colleges of education (e.g., Eiszler, 2002). As a Black mother and advocate for students with disabilities, I cannot help but make connections between neoliberal universities' customer service approach to appeasing students, the westernized academy's hegemonic prioritizing of research productivity over pedagogy, and the lack of teacher preparedness for addressing multiple marginality in P-12 schools.

Homeroom made space for discussions about these ethical quandaries. I brought up how disconcerting it is for "equity scholars" to advise others to be selfish. I understand and appreciate those who encourage junior faculty—and especially women of Color—to avoid exploitative dynamics. Being selfish, however, is incompatible with the community focus that attracted me to education in the first place. Allen understood where I came from. She compared my repulsion to self-serving individualism to the reaction of a miner's canary. I recognized the metaphor, as it has been alluded to when describing education at the intersections of race and (perceived) disability (Shalaby, 2017; Waitoller et al., 2010). When she used it to describe Black women in the academy, I remembered captive maternals who similarly were made to sacrifice their wellness for the collective.

Since establishing Homeroom, we have discussed how Black women are pressed and "peer reviewed" their entire lives in ways that are both refining and crushing. Regardless of context, for the benefit of our families, communities, and future goals, we learned to persist under constant scrutiny. Moreover, we have witnessed a range of teacher education programs, having both attended Ivy League universities and minority-serving institutions (Boveda, a Hispanic-serving institution; Allen, a historically Black university) and worked at predominantly white state universities. We find it critical to interrogate knowledge systems that have erased or diminished Black women's epistemologies. We also are concerned that teacher education professors are disincentivized from performing pedagogical excellence. Similarly, equity-based teacher educators are often punished for holding preservice and in-service educators to high standards of praxis that center multiply-marginalized learners.

CAPTIVE MATERNALS' INTERVENTION: HUMANIZATION

I, (Allen) am the great-granddaughter of two coal miners who died of black lung disease. The canary in the coal mine has always been an effective allusion for me. I write this narrative with the understanding of my ancestors' sacrifices and driven by familial and communal ties. I am also driven by the futurity represented in my children. Pre-pandemic, the birth of my daughter taught me the need to prioritize wellness and wholeness. During the pandemic, seeing my son's brilliance threatened by remote learning motivated me to learn more about humanizing pedagogy; I needed to rebuff the uninspired and decontextualized schooling I witnessed. As someone who studies asset pedagogies in urban contexts, I felt compelled to recalibrate my scholarly focus. I turned to examining what digital "access" means during distance learning. For example, while provisions for devices and the Internet are necessary, teachers may also render curricula inaccessible by engaging in culturally alienating and technocratic instruction.

When Boveda asked me to join her in writing in the morning, she reminded me of a question I posed during the 2019 American Education Research Association annual conference: "Can we start a Black teacher educator group? This has been soul-draining work and I want to talk through it." It was not until the pandemic, however, that either of us had the capacity to return to that question. I work at a mid-size honors university. I teach an equity-oriented literacy course and courses that unpack the sociocultural context of schooling. When COVID-19 happened, I was recovering from the fall semester, which is always fraught with passive resistance from students in my literacies in the content areas class. The undergraduates, who had limited prior coursework focused on these topics, did not understand or appreciate talking about culture and social injustice in a literacy course.

Every semester, I spent considerable time developing curricula that centered white preservice teachers' understandings of racism's manifestation in education, thus working to supplement their lack of prior engagement with equity. This effort competed with time dedicated to write or think deeply about asset pedagogy research. I felt responsible for preparing the type of humanizing teachers (del Carmen Salazar, 2013) I would want teaching my own children. I envisioned teachers who can see and build upon the brilliance that all students, especially multiply-marginalized children and youth, have.

One would imagine that my teaching commitments and scholarship would integrate seamlessly; however, the overwhelming whiteness of teacher education constricted me. Spending time trying to convince undergraduate students and in-service teachers of Black people's humanity was not generative. Ironically, as I affirmed culturally relevant practices, I was centering whiteness and undermining myself. The work required to understand white emotionality and resistance well enough to craft curricula and professional development opportunities is arduous. Although necessary, it consumed the time and space needed for me to map out my research. I defaulted to pursuing "convenient" research opportunities.

The pandemic, however, was a conduit that led me to remember Toni Morrison's statement about the function of racism: distraction. Unlike caged canaries who could not escape the toxicity they detected, Homeroom, the remote portal created with Black women, enabled me to name how I no longer wanted to react to the distraction of whiteness and its incessant demands that I prove my worthiness. Moving forward, I must anchor myself in my lived experiences and cultural ways of knowing to reframe academic engagement. I named how the ontology and epistemologies of Black teachers are marginalized and outright ignored in teacher education literature (with the exception of studies such as McKinney de

Royston et al., 2020). Shifting my scholarship to the professional contributions of Black teachers, including their spirituality, has energized me. This focus can potentially reshape the conversation and standards for quality teaching. I also envision a fundamental shift in what teacher education looks like when it no longer centers whiteness.

While conducting an investigation on humanizing pedagogy in the midst of the pandemic, a Black middle school educator articulated the dehumanizing outcome of education that normalizes white, male, able-bodied, middle- to upper-class, cisgendered, English-speaking individuals: It renders anyone outside of those characteristics invisible or deficient. Having witnessed how often those assumptions inform the education of preservice teachers and the mentoring of teacher education researchers, Boveda and I must intervene on behalf of ourselves and our children.

PRESSING FORWARD

Our stories demonstrate how our embodiments of the captive maternal position us as visionaries who seek reprieve from the toxicity we experienced as Black academics and mothers with children in P-12 schools. While we benefit from our status as Ivy League-educated university professors, those societal privileges do not necessarily transfer to how our Black children, or the multiply-marginalized children our scholarship centers, experience schooling. Our professional achievements have not shielded us from the combative nature of academia vis-à-vis the peer review and tenure and promotion processes that often penalize Black women scholars for our social justice commitments. In spite of these pressures, we forge on, grounding our work in possibilities that prioritize community and wholeness. It is in that spirit that we co-construct humanizing and ethical praxis.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

We can no longer move in individualistic ways within the westernized academy, which centers those with the most advantages in our society. Instead, we will continue to prioritize marginalized students, colleagues, and community members, not only in word, but also in daily practice. As such, we co-constructed ethical considerations in question format to hold each other answerable to one another and to make sure we do not continue the dehumanizing path set prior to the pandemic. We offer these to our colleagues in equity-based research communities who are teacher educators, as reminders that we are pedagogues advancing equitable educational opportunities and outcomes for all.

Alignment. *When positioning oneself as an equity-based education researcher, is there alignment between espoused values and how one navigates one's role as an academic? For example: Does the teacher education researcher consider how dis/engagement with research activities, teaching, and service affects multiply-minoritized educators and P-12 learners?*

Although university structures provide fewer rewards for teaching and service—and both empirical and theoretical contributions are of utmost importance—to claim to focus on equity and inclusion in P-12 schooling while engaging in self-aggrandizing and self-serving moves is antithetical to the purpose of this work. Recognizing and naming the competing messaging education researchers receive will help us recognize and, perhaps, resist the disciplining that trains us to represent the interest of the ableist, imperial white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. Moreover, if there are instances where concessions must be made, the question of alignment helps us to move with intentionality and clarity, without overstating liberatory agendas in our roles as academics.

Sociohistorical context. *Is there an understanding of the dynamics between marginalized groups and the sociohistorical context in which teacher education and research is occurring? For example: Does the teacher education researcher have knowledge about the historical trajectories of the field, the equity-based research community, and the IHEs that they are or have been affiliated with?*

As Black women teacher educators and researchers, we embody multiple markers of diversity while simultaneously shouldering the loadedness that affiliations with academic institutions carry. In addition to recognizing the oppressive history of the westernized academy, it is important that equity-based teacher educators study the trajectory of their field. For example, Boveda and McCray (2020) acknowledge how a social justice agenda for people with disabilities produced special education; the field's alignment with academic traditions tied to eugenics, however, has rightfully engendered mistrust from racialized and other minoritized communities. Furthermore, the specific histories of IHEs matter. With over 2,000 institutions in the United States and a range of policies that affect families from diverse backgrounds, equity-based teacher education research must be contextualized. Similarly, the researcher must understand the contexts, both where they were trained and where they are faculty.

Peer-review/community evaluations. *When articulating and assessing the quality of equity-based education researcher activities, how are the communities that teacher educators claim to support informing evaluative dynamics?*

As academics committed to teacher education, we find that one of the most disheartening aspects of receiving negative evaluations from predominantly white students is the challenge of parsing out constructive feedback from white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal resistance. Allen has learned of Black women colleagues who, instead of dismissing student evaluations altogether, created student feedback questionnaires centered on equity and justice. As tenure-earning researchers, we find the critiques colleagues offer helpful for conveying our intellectual contributions to academic communities. It is not only important to receive individualized affirmation; we desire critical feedback that interrogates our contributions to solutions and the betterment of those most affected by multiply-marginalized identities. Critical race praxis from critical legal studies is a potential way for us as teacher education researchers to move forward in this regard. Yamamoto's (1997) conceptualization of critical race praxis articulates the need to recognize the interplay between theory, practice, and community to assure one's knowledge-making is grounded in the lived experiences of those who are consistently subjugated within oppressive institutions, such as P-12 schooling and the westernized academy.

PANDEMIC AS PORTAL: WHAT WE MUST LEAVE BEHIND

COVID-19 served as a portal to create space, with other Black women academics, where we could fully bring ourselves and our cultural expressions, concerns, and sociolinguistic practices. Collectively, we paused, reflected, and named what we can no longer uphold within our roles in equity-based teacher education research and university communities. Although COVID-19 highlighted and exacerbated marginalizing dynamics we and our children experienced, we have always dealt with competing demands, since the rewards and expectations of the neoliberal and westernized university are often taxing. Therefore, we co-constructed ethical considerations to navigate tensions we encounter as captive maternals in teacher education and to avoid defaulting to activities that privilege what least serves the most vulnerable and marginalized members of our communities.

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Recognizing and Sustaining #BlackGirlMagic: Reimagining Justice-Oriented Approaches in Teacher Education

Tia C. Madkins

Many educators and teacher educators have (re)committed to pursuing justice, sharing stories, and centering joy and self-care as our education, race, and global public health crises continue to converge. Losing in-person entertainment options (e.g., Broadway shows, concerts) inspired new ways to enjoy our favorite shows and books (e.g., Quarantine TV; [Dr. Rabadi-Raol's Tell-a-Tale](#)) and dance the night away (e.g., [DJ D-Nice's Club Quarantine](#)). Maintaining traditions of storytelling and healing through music, artists shared renditions of their favorite songs and gave free virtual performances (e.g., [Deborah Cox and Tamia performed "Count on Me"](#), [Lizzo's live meditation](#)).

Other stories highlighted the pervasiveness of White supremacy and injustice in schools. Many of these stories make clear how inequalities disproportionately affect Black, Indigenous, and Latinx children's lives (Katayama et al, 2020). Yet, even during COVID-19, when most people significantly increased time spent online (Koeze & Popper, 2020) witnessing growing disparities in our society—Black girls' and womxn's lives and stories *still* remain largely invisible, devalued, or unbelievable (Cooper, 2020; Reid, 2020). Lorde (2017, p. VIII) reminds us that although our “silence will not protect” us, when “speaking as a Black [girl or] woman,” we are among the most vulnerable in our world.¹

What if, instead, we used this moment as a “portal, a gateway between one world and the next” where we value and fight for Black girls' lives (Roy, 2020)? We would have more cohesive approaches for supporting these vulnerable learners, celebrating the diversity of Black girlhoods, and disrupting monolithic views of who Black girls are and are becoming. In this reimagined world, using justice-oriented pedagogies (i.e., strengths-based approaches fostering development of learners' agency, critical thinking skills, and critical consciousness) is central to all educators' work. Though pursuing justice for Black girls varies *across* PK-12 contexts, Black girls' humanity, contributions, and brilliance will be affirmed *within each* learning context.

In this essay, I argue that one way to accomplish this is for P-12 educators to recognize and sustain [#BlackGirlMagic](#), which [CaShawn Thompson](#) defined in 2013 as Black girls' and womxn's universal awesomeness and brilliance. First, I define constructs and share my researcher positionality statement, telling the story of how my experiences shape my lens. Next, I review origins of [#BlackGirlMagic](#), considerations for its use, and recent scholarship on teacher education and Black girls' schooling experiences. Building upon this research prioritizing storytelling, I then discuss one way Black communities have reimagined our world. Using the [VerzuzTV music battles](#) developed during the pandemic, I discuss how Black girls and womxn are both hyper-visible and invisible. Finally, I share ideas—without being prescriptive—about how practicing educators and teacher educators (working with either aspiring or practicing educators) can make [#BlackGirlMagic](#) visible.

1 The most vulnerable populations of girls and womxn in the US and globally are Indigenous (Hopkins, 2020). To this end, Department of the Interior Secretary Deb Haaland established an investigative unit for missing and murdered Indigenous girls and womxn in her first month of office (Native News Online, 2021).

Constructs defined. I intentionally use *Black*, rather than *African American* or other terms, because there are several African Diaspora ethnicities within this racialized identity (e.g., African, African American, Afro-Asian, Afro-Indigenous, Afro-Latin@, Black American, Caribbean, and multiracial). I define *Black girls* as school-aged learners identifying as Black and female (knowing some learners we see as Black girls have gender-fluid or non-binary identities), usually between ages 4 and 18 in P-12 environments. Finally, I use *learners* instead of *students* because *all* the children that educators interact with in any context are always learning, in and out of schools.

Researcher positionality statement. I mainly write in first person (i.e., *I*), but also write using the collective *we* to emphasize our familiar yet unique experiences *and* my identity as a Black girl who became a Black woman. Much of my childhood was spent with my two younger sisters learning to love and celebrate our Black girlhoods in suburban Atlanta, Georgia. I am one of seven children (three sisters, three brothers) whose parents survived the Jim Crow era in Shreveport, Louisiana (mother) and the cotton belt region of East Texas (father), areas with some of the highest rates of lynching in the US until 1950 (New York Times, 2015).

Our parents taught us to love our faith, family, and cultural ways of knowing and being. My sisters and I spent our weekends engaged with our church community in historic Southwest Atlanta—affectionately called the SWATS—loving but not romanticizing our Blackness. We participated in our church's Girl Scouts chapter whose members were (and still are) only Black girls. We looked forward to going to the annual battle of the bands hosted by the Atlanta University Center in the SWATS, a longstanding marching band competition among historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), which remains a popular regional event.

In contemporary times, similar cultural events and experiences vary across age groups, Black ethnic groups, and US regions, particularly in the COVID-19 era. This may include Black girls inspiring the creation of social media sensations (e.g., [HersheKissis](#) or [Renegade Creator Jalaiah Harmon](#)) or participating in out-of-school learning designed for Black girls (e.g., [SOLHOT](#) or Jacobs, 2016). These experiences supported my sisters and me in embracing the beauty of sisterhood with Black girls in our neighborhood, the SWATS, and elsewhere.

These lessons were not without complications, because although our parents survived Jim Crow, they carried much of the internalized racism of that time with them. While our suburban life may have equated success as proximity to Whiteness, our racial socialization experiences centered love and appreciation for Black people, cultures, and histories. It was foreseeable that my three siblings who pursued postsecondary degrees graduated from Howard University, a prominent historically Black college and university (HBCU). I attended a historically White institution (HWI), Boston University, where I was one of few Black girls becoming womxn in STEM² with a pre-med emphasis. Within the HWI, my experiences of feeling isolated and undervalued, and the false narratives about being exceptional (Morton & Parsons, 2018; Watkins & Mensah, 2019) contribute to my understandings of why recognizing #BlackGirlMagic is necessary across learning contexts.

Unsurprisingly—but much to my parents' chagrin—I pursued a career in education rather than medicine with my biology degree. Countless family members were/are educators across (in)formal PK-20 settings, including two of my maternal aunts, who have collectively taught young learners for nearly 100 years in Shreveport, Louisiana. Teaching is a largely feminized profession and not as well-respected or lucrative

2 STEM: science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

as medicine (Griffiths, 2006). But I knew my soul's work would be satisfied by working with young learners and building upon the historical legacy of Black womxn teachers (Madkins, 2011).

As an educator in both Northern and Southern California, I experienced successes and failures while working with PK-8 learners and their families—especially Black girls—before earning a doctoral degree in education. My collective educational, personal, and professional relationships with Black girls and womxn reiterate the importance of sisterhood and multimodal storytelling, informing my university-based teaching and research.

This intergenerational and experiential knowledge shapes my positionality. I understand how uplifting and loving Black girls is at odds with deficit narratives, internalized racism, and anti-Blackness in teacher education, schooling, and beyond. That's exactly how White supremacy works. Nonetheless, I remain hopeful *and* committed to drawing upon these generative experiences and centering justice-oriented approaches in my teaching and research. I recognize the privileges I have in engaging in this work (and in life) as a cisgendered, heterosexual light-skinned Black woman. Thus, in this reimagined world, I will leave behind instructional practices in my teacher education courses that make space for White rage or fragility (Anderson, 2016). These emotions and responses only serve to preserve Whiteness in teacher education and avoid self-examination of racist practices (Souto-Manning, 2019).

I will also continue to insist we no longer capitulate to narrow views about Black childhoods that center Black boys. This can be achieved by prioritizing Black girlhoods and womxn in my research and teaching while engaging in professional service duties that amplify their voices and lived experiences. Using the pandemic as a portal means I will work to ensure educators and teacher educators understand the variations in and value of Black girlhoods as we improve our pedagogical practices with Black children across contexts. I will not be overly concerned with how such commitments may influence my university-based teaching or other evaluations. My positionality allows me to employ this particular lens in service to Black girls *and* to protect Black girlhoods. Reimagining Black girls' educational lives and futures serves as a point of departure for this essay *and* for engaging our work across learning contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

#BlackGirlMagic. Joan Morgan (2017) and others have used Black girl magic or similar phrases for several years to affirm our excellence (Toliver, 2019). By introducing the hashtag, #BlackGirlMagic, in 2013, CaShawn Thompson amplified positive images and contributions of Black girls and womxn, shifting conversations to focus on strengths and achievements rather than deficits and discipline. Importantly, Thompson highlighted how Black womxn are oftentimes “the *only* people supporting us” (Thomas, 2015, emphasis added). Thompson simultaneously demonstrates how Black girls' and womxn's brilliance and awesomeness are all-encompassing (i.e., we *all* have these qualities) and how we are often invisible, devalued, and unsupported due to White supremacy, patriarchy, and misogyny.

These are not new ideas or critiques, as evidenced by prominent Black feminist perspectives (e.g., Crenshaw & Flanders, 2015; Hill Collins, 2002). But, the global resonance of #BlackGirlMagic is a radical reminder that some Black girls and womxn do not recognize their universal brilliance and awesomeness. Even those of us who ground our teaching and research in our communities' strengths (e.g., Black womxn equity-focused teacher educators) can be socialized into erasing and/or ignoring the important understandings of who we are (Boveda et al., 2019). Thus, it is important for educators to recognize and sustain #BlackGirlMagic in *all* Black girls, especially those who may not consistently receive and/or internalize positive messages about who they are (Evans, 2020).

Recognizing and sustaining #BlackGirlMagic is full of both possibilities and tensions. The hashtag has inspired:

- special issues of Black women’s magazines, like Essence Magazine, and journal articles (e.g., Ife, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2017)
- merchandise (see Figure 1), **a book club** featuring Black womxn authors and wine from a **Black-owned winery**
- **songs** on streaming platforms
- **BlackGirlMathgic** and
- educational conferences (Tesfamichael, 2019).

#BlackGirlMagic can also serve as an entry point for promoting healing and self-love among Black girls and womxn (Staples, 2017). This work may not *seem* necessary, but we must consider how searches for “beauty” via Google Images or gif apps have historically excluded Black girls and womxn. Why are Black children left out of images of early childhood depicting “innocence” and “beauty” (Nxumalo & ross, 2019)? Why are negative images and vulgar words associated with Google searches for “Black girls” (Noble, 2018)? Why is Beyonce’s song, “Brown Skin Girl,” uplifting the beauty of brown-skinned and dark brown-skinned Black girls, both revered and despised (Kendall, 2019)?



Figure 1. Author (left), wearing a Black Girl Magic T-shirt, with **Dr. Fikile Nxumalo** (right), wearing a **#CiteBlackWomen** T-shirt at merchandise book club meeting

Critiques. We know Black girls are “much more than magic” (Ladson-Billings, 2017, p. 3) and must also consider how using #BlackGirlMagic without intentionality and reflection can reify stereotypes and/or the adultification of Black girls. To be clear, the hashtag and its meaning have been misinterpreted, appropriated, and invalidly critiqued (e.g., **#Blackgirlmagic is racist**). Importantly, scholars point out that #BlackGirlMagic can perpetuate strong, superhuman (i.e., magical creatures) Black women tropes for Black girls (e.g., McPherson, 2020). #BlackGirlMagic can falsely suggest that Black girls are inherently magical, thereby capable and resilient enough *on their own* to respond to the unique challenges they face in schools (McPherson, 2020).

These structural challenges function to reproduce inequalities in Black girls' school lives, even during the pandemic. For example, Black girls are often pushed out of schools via harsh disciplinary practices for minor offenses and have differential opportunities to learn (Cox, 2015; Ife, 2017; Jones, 2017; M. Morris, 2016). As such, educators and teacher educators must acknowledge and address systemic failures to adequately support Black girls' educational futures. Finally, we must be cognizant of how magic is connected to various African Diaspora spiritual practices, and how centering #BlackGirlMagic can be disrespectful towards and/or dismissive of these practices (Dalilah, 2017).

Invisibility of #BlackGirlMagic in teacher education. Teacher education scholars have called out the sociohistorical roots of teacher education that center Whiteness, claim teacher education as White property, and marginalize the work of Black womxn (Ife, 2017; Jones, 2017; M. Morris, 2016; Madkins, 2011; Souto-Manning, 2019). Others have traced educators' deficit views of Black girls, including seeing them as adults rather than children, as impolite, and/or as disinterested in their educational futures (R. Brown, 2013; Cox, 2015; Ife, 2017; E. Morris, 2007).

Taken together, scholars who pursue these lines of inquiry demonstrate how #BlackGirlMagic is invisible within teacher education, especially university-based programs. Rarely do we ask educators to identify, examine, and connect their racialized beliefs to their dispositions and instructional practices. To make #BlackGirlMagic visible, teacher educators have to name and reject these tropes about Black girls, decenter Whiteness, and commit to the ongoing, daily work of transforming teacher education.

Research on Black girls. Recently, educational researchers have examined the heterogeneity of Black girls and productive ways of supporting their academic achievement (e.g., R. Brown, 2013; Cox, 2015; Nyachae, 2016; Toliver, 2019). This work provides complex, nuanced understandings of Black girls across learning contexts. Predictably, Black womxn have led much of this work, often using Black feminist perspectives (e.g., Crenshaw & Flanders, 2015; Hill Collins, 2002); music as a tool for teaching and learning (e.g., Waters et al., 2019); and/or storytelling methodological approaches (see Lewis & Hildebrandt, 2019). In and outside of educational research, this mode of inquiry includes:

- counterstories (King & Pringle, 2019)
- digital storytelling (Price-Dennis, 2016)
- narrative inquiry (Gordon et al., 2019)
- photonarrative (Goldston & Nichols, 2009)
- portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016) and
- testimonios (Baez, 2010)

Scholars have used storytelling in its varied forms to amplify Black girls' voices and experiences across subdisciplines within education (e.g., Allen-Handy et al., 2020; Kelly, 2020; Winn, 2019). Others have shared autoethnographic or autobiographical accounts of their lives as former Black girls (e.g., Jones, 2017) or used storytelling to increase their visibility as Black womxn teacher educators (e.g., Skerrett, 2006).

Collectively, this research: 1) illuminates Black girls' strengths and brilliance while moving away from binary representations of Black girls as *ladies* or *loudies* (E. Morris, 2007); 2) contributes to our understandings of how to strengthen Black girls' educational futures; and 3) reiterates the importance of Black girls' and womxn's stories in education. In our reimagined world, aspiring and practicing educators and teacher educators will value these stories by providing space in classrooms for Black girls to tell their stories and celebrate their #BlackGirlMagic. They will also honor the complexity of Black girlhoods and expand their ideas about Black girls' multiple identities and identity development as they work to recognize and sustain #BlackGirlMagic.

RECOGNIZING AND SUSTAINING #BLACKGIRLMAGIC

If our global pandemic is a portal for reimagining a world where Black girls’ educational lives *and* stories matter, then the Verzuz battles—developed by Black performing artists in response to the pandemic—are an appropriate, illustrative tool. **VerzuzTV battles** are entertaining and embody multimodal storytelling for Black communities, especially during difficult times. In the following section, I draw upon three brief, important lessons about visibility, storytelling, and sisterhood emerging from Verzuz battles relevant to #BlackGirlMagic, teaching, and learning. Finally, I offer considerations for *all* educators and teacher educators for using these lessons in their work, especially with Black girls.

LESSONS FROM THE VERZUZ BATTLES

In March 2020, legendary producers Timbaland and Swiss Beatz introduced Verzuz battles as a new form of entertainment (Amorosi, 2020). In these friendly competitions (livestreamed via Instagram), rhythm and blues (R&B), neo-soul, and hip-hop artists, DJs, and producers battle each other to determine who has the best musical catalogue. Artists find ways to weave their personal and professional stories into the battle, where each artist plays one song in each of 20 rounds. Viewers “decide” who won the round and share their thoughts in the comments section of the livestream. Of the 22 battles in 2020, only three featured Black womxn artists³ (see Table 1). Yet these garnered some of Verzuz’s highest ratings, number of celebrity viewers (including First Lady Michelle Obama and Vice President Kamala Harris), and social media presence (Jenkins, 2020). These R&B and neo-soul artists demonstrate the universal appeal of Black womxn artists and embody #BlackGirlMagic.

Table 1. Most Popular Verzuz Battles: March to September 2020

Featured Artists and Date	Number of Viewers	Social Media Impressions (Exposure to Content)
Erykah Badu vs. Jill Scott May 9, 2020	710,000 total viewers via Instagram Live (becoming the highest-rated battle at the time)	1 billion+ impressions
DMX vs. Snoop Dogg July 22, 2020	3.4 million total viewers via Instagram Live and Apple Music/TV	1.75 billion+ impressions
Brandy vs. Monica August 31, 2020	6 million total viewers via Instagram Live, YouTube, and Apple Music/TV	5 billion+ impressions
Gladys Knight vs. Patti LaBelle September 13, 2020	3.7 million concurrent viewers via Instagram Live and Apple Music/TV	3 billion+ impressions

Sources: Amorosi, 2020; Gunn, 2020; Jenkins, 2020; Vasishta & Aswad, 2020; & **VerzuzTV**

Visibility. The male-centric Verzuz battles demonstrate Black girls and womxn’s (in)visibility. Despite critiquing Verzuz creators’ lack of accountability to and the invisibility of Black womxn (Jenkins, 2020;

³ Alicia Keys, the only other female artist featured in 2020, battled John Legend **on Juneteenth**; both are known for their ballads and piano skills.

Thompson, 2020), Black womxn artists were excluded from battles until early May (i.e., **Erykah Badu vs. Jill Scott**). Once Black womxn became increasingly *visible* in the battles, Verzuz gained popularity, as evidenced by viewership and social media impressions (see Table 1), **streaming platforms** and corporate sponsorships.

Black womxn's invisibility was also demonstrated during the only **gospel music battle**, with icons **Fred Hammond** and **Kirk Franklin**, just as the world began protesting the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and others. In a **#SayTheirNames** segment, the artists read the names of Black boys and men killed by police or vigilantes—leaving out Black girls and womxn. Fortunately, Black womxn celebrity viewers like **Amber Riley** and **Lena Waithe** reminded them via livestream comments of the Black girls, womxn, and trans individuals who were *also* killed (D. Brown, 2020), forcing Kirk and Fred to **#SayHerName**.

There are important parallels here for teaching and learning as we work to recognize and sustain **#BlackGirlMagic**. Similar to Verzuz battles, important national and local educational initiatives have focused on Black boys (e.g., **African American Male Achievement**, **My Brother's Keeper**), erasing Black girls from narratives about improving education for Black children (i.e., making Black girls invisible). In contrast, focusing solely on regulating Black girls' attitudes and behaviors makes their presence across learning contexts hyper-visible, contributing to Black girls' adultification, criminalization, and positioning as less capable learners (M. Morris, 2016). Instead, we should seek to make Black girls and their **#BlackGirlMagic** *visible*—rather than invisible or hyper-visible—in ways that center their universal brilliance and awesomeness. In doing so, we position and affirm Black girls as capable, engaged learners and promote justice (Green et al., 2020; M. Morris, 2016; ross, 2018).

Another lesson to learn from Verzuz battles is to include Black girls *from the beginning* of our planning efforts to meet their academic and socioemotional needs. In addition to inviting Black girls to share their stories and insights and take leadership roles, this might include welcoming Black family and community members into schools and university-based classrooms to provide their perspectives on working effectively with Black girls.

Multimodal storytelling. Varied forms of storytelling (e.g., digital, oral, visual, and/or written) became an integral part of Verzuz battles as they increased in popularity. Artists and viewers alike found sharing their stories served as a way to explain histories, uplift, and heal. One way this was evidenced was during a round of **Gladys vs. Patti**. After playing “**If You Asked Me To**,” originally released in 1989, Patti LaBelle declared, “I did it first!” This was in reference to **Celine Dion's successful 1992 cover of the song**, which prompted Patti to share her stories. She not only asserted her **#BlackGirlMagic**, but demonstrated how she became invisible in the narrative about the song's success.

This is an important lesson about sharing our lived experiences for educators and teacher educators. Prioritizing storytelling while working with Black girls in *any* learning setting provides space for sharing, appreciation, healing, and sensemaking (Staples, 2017). In so doing, Black girls have opportunities to witness **#BlackGirlMagic** in themselves and other Black girls, which is important for *all* learners. In giving attention to **#BlackGirlMagic** and multimodal storytelling, educators and teacher educators not only demonstrate they value Black girls' and womxn's contributions, they also position Black girls as capable learners and foster inclusive classrooms.

Another lesson we can learn from Verzuz battles is the need to make Black girls' intellectual, social, and other contributions visible. Within (in)formal K-12 contexts, this means finding ways to recognize Black girls as they see themselves, instead of through the White gaze—in comparison to White learners, especially White girls—or in comparison to Black boys. In university-based classrooms, teacher educators should diversify course syllabi (Appleton, 2019) and include scholarship uplifting the work of Black womxn scholars, educators, and activists (e.g., Muhammad et al., 2020). They should also ensure that readings and activities in methods courses decenter Whiteness and deficit views of Black girls.

Sisterhood and relationships. Finally, the Verzuz battles offer important lessons about sisterhood and relationships. One of the best moments of the Gladys vs. Patti battle was Patti stating, “**We are not working together, we are *being together*.**” Here, she centered the idea that sisterhood is about *being together* in community rather than positioning one person as more important than another. She also signaled that *working together* means *being* in a collaborative, noncompetitive, and generative space with others—a nonjudgmental place *to be* where you and your ideas are shaped by *and* shape others. We also witnessed during Brandy vs. Monica how sisterhood and relationships can be complicated. They shared their successes and longstanding conflicts with each other (Cochrane, 2020), demonstrating how they continue to work through their unresolved interpersonal issues, like many adult womxn.

In reimagining relationships with Black girls (learner-learner, educator-learner), there are important lessons from the battles about how simply being together, building community, and handling conflict are relational norms. Given the hyperfocus on regulating Black girls' attitudes and behaviors in education (Epstein et al., 2017), it is especially important to understand that Black girls' engagement in conflict should not equal criminalization. Instead, we can view interpersonal and other types of conflict as opportunities for storytelling, reflection, and problem-solving, knowing that the conflict may not be resolved. What matters *more* is that Black girls are given space to productively engage in resolving conflicts without being adultified or their situation being sensationalized, if we are to learn from Brandy and Monica. By making sensemaking processes *visible*, we also offer Black girls opportunities to reflect, offer reciprocal feedback, and normalize working through conflicts over time.

Another powerful lesson stems from the Erykah vs. Jill battle: the importance of fostering and maintaining spaces for healing, relaxation, and appreciation. In schools, Black girls are often viewed in comparison to White girls; they have their worth and abilities questioned and are held to unrealistic standards (Waite, 2021). As such, they need spaces in and out of schools where they are not made to feel they must strive for perfection. Educators and teacher educators can also provide spaces where Black girls can learn how sisterhood means holding and making space for others to heal, shine, and *simply be together*.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this historical moment, we can celebrate Black girls' lives, stories, brilliance, and awesomeness. Recognizing and sustaining #BlackGirlMagic is one way for teacher educators and educators to push back against deficit narratives about Black girls (and the Black womxn they will become). In this essay, I shared ideological perspectives on *why* this work is necessary, lessons learned from Verzuz battles, and examples of *how* we might carefully engage this work in our reimagined world. I must also remind all educators and teacher educators—especially those who are non-Black—not to engage in cultural appropriation, essentializing, or romanticizing of Black girls and womxn. These actions defeat our collective purpose and potentially reify stereotypes and negative images of Black girls.

Taking this work seriously requires *all* educators and teacher educators to identify, confront, and reject deficit thinking about minoritized communities, especially Black girls. This means examining our biases and the ways we may have (un)intentionally internalized deficit narratives grounded in White supremacy. We also have to build, maintain, and value relationships with Black communities surrounding our schools and universities, who play an important role in recognizing and sustaining #BlackGirlMagic.

Finally, if we are to disrupt the status quo in service of Black girls while learning from the Verzuz battles, we cannot be afraid to acknowledge and address historical and contemporary racist practices within teacher education. This is particularly important in our graduate courses (e.g., research trends and the history of teacher education), where we are often training the next generation of teacher educators and researchers. This is risky work in academia, and as such, mid-career and senior scholars must advocate for their colleagues—especially their junior colleagues. Facilitating these powerful learning experiences can result in being unfairly penalized in their university and teaching evaluations, for which Womxn of Color already typically receive lower scores (Flaherty, 2019). Using the pandemic as a portal, we can choose to fight for Black girls’ lives and educational futures and thrive in our reimagined world.

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Telling Tales for Justice and Equity: Storytelling as Public Nepantla Pedagogy

Ayesha Rabadi-Raol

In 2020, as a global pandemic health crisis united us in a similar plight worldwide, I asked myself: How can spaces for social closeness traverse borders—creatively, publicly—and counter the discourse of social distancing, which in reality means physical distancing? My mind was “still racing back and forth, longing for a return to normality,” but I knew that “nothing could be worse than a return to normality” (Roy, 2020b).

With Arundhati Roy’s words as a North Star, amidst physical separation and stay-at-home orders, I considered: How might virtual spaces become an in-between space of hybridity—what Anzaldúa (1987) called Nepantla. As I began to recognize that the rupture the pandemic had brought about could serve as a site for transformation (Delgado Bernal, 2018), I wondered how my own feelings of in-betweenness—as a transnational, woman, teacher, and teacher educator of Color in North America—might serve as a site for reimagination.

I inhabit a space in-between; my identity changes depending upon my location, as is the case for many people. My identity and experiences made me think about what I could do in a pandemic to support children and families, to enact a public pedagogy from a site of Nepantla; [here is a little more about me and my history](#).

As Roy (2020b) reminded me, “in the midst of this terrible despair” I had the chance to “imagine the world anew” from my own location. And so, it was with more questions than answers that I envisioned and cultivated a virtual read-aloud space that crossed geopolitical borders in the form of Tell-a-Tale. While it was a response to the physical isolation, fear, and detachment brought about by COVID-19, [Tell-a-Tale](#) offers insights into the need for public educational spaces. Such spaces, although not altogether novel—they are similar to read-alouds in libraries and bookstores—allow for children and adults to engage from countries across the world. The virtual space thus becomes a “public” educational space.

PUBLIC PEDAGOGY AT THE CROSSROADS

As the COVID-19 pandemic crossed geopolitical borders, I considered: What does it mean to break through the encapsulation of place? Inspired by Ripatti-Torniainen (2018), I thought about what it means to fashion a public space to honor our humanity, to reclaim our connections, to counter our isolation. My pedagogy employed the very tenets of *public* identified by Ripatti-Torniainen (2018):

- centering circulating discourses,
- honoring the need for social connections between strangers,
- considering macrostructures, and
- attending to the political public sphere.

Aligned with Ripatti-Torniainen (2018), when I discuss circulating discourses in public pedagogy, I mean how we interact with the dominant discourses in social and cultural ways which bring together individuals with similar or collective interpretations of meanings in the public realm. Identifying a

discourse does not mean agreeing with it, but instead, to be able to understand and address it. In the case of Tell-a-Tale, it meant coming together with the viewers twice a week to share children's literature and discuss how it related to justice and equity. In so doing, I made social and cultural connections with strangers through shared interpretations and online spaces. These connections were situated within larger contextual macrostructures, which in the case of Tell-a-Tale was the pandemic and how it affected teaching and learning.

Public pedagogy can be best understood as “an educational intervention enacted in the interest of the public quality of spaces and places and the public quality of human togetherness” (Biesta, 2012, p. 684). Applying public pedagogy as a theoretical construct, I used this platform to create a space of “public intellectualism and social activism” (Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 338). In alignment with Lizárraga and Gutiérrez (2018) and considering macrostructures of exclusion in society, I sought to center “dispositions and practices that thrive on the boundary—spaces that are not always sanctioned as educational” (p. 38).

I did so by re-envisioning “the pandemic as a portal” (Roy, 2020a; 2020b), ensuring that stories and voices with an equity and justice perspective took center stage.

Tell-a-Tale encompassed historical, emotional, and social aims: It served as a way to explore some of the injustices experienced historically and contemporarily (e.g., racism, socioeconomic injustice, bullying), it brought together individuals isolated due to COVID-19, and it enacted a space for community. Through Nepantla, I inhabited the borderlands, both literally and metaphorically.

NEPANTLA

Nepantla is a word derived by Gloria Anzaldúa from Nahuatl, an Aztec language, that describes a feeling of in-betweenness, a feeling of having an identity that is neither here nor there (Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017). Maffie (2014) explained that Nepantla is “[t]he joining together of the two paths [that] creates a new space: an ambiguous space betwixt and between the two. The crossroads is ontologically ambiguous since it is neither one path nor the other yet simultaneously both paths together” (p. 361).

Nepantla is a space we inhabit when we lose control, when we experience anxiety, and when we are confused; it encompassed my feelings and my very self during the pandemic. It was also a tool for political change. It allowed me to inhabit multiple worlds, to enter multiple homes, and to be in dialogue with multiple individuals. In a world where much of the sense of connection takes place in private realms (homes), Tell-a-Tale allowed me to burst through the boundaries that encapsulate a sense of intimacy. It was a liminal space where multiple realities were at play. It was at these crossroads that I made sense of the interconnectedness of social, racial, ethnic, national, cultural, linguistic, economic, and gendered identities across geopolitical borders (Mancilla et al., 2014).

Nepantla afforded me an in-between positionality, whereby I rejected the rigidity of borders and occupied a liminal in-between space, being in my own home in Toronto while entering the homes of those tuning in, seeking connection, across the world. For me, Nepantla was “the site of transformation, that place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures” (Anzaldúa, 2002, pp. 548-549). Importantly, Nepantla calls for transformation of thought, theory, and action. It is not a site for simplistic solutions, but for complex questions.

CONTEXTUALIZING TELL-A-TALE

With the school closures associated with the spread of the coronavirus, some families joined “pods” set up to teach kids, fashioning what *The Wall Street Journal* called “at-home schools.” Some parents did so by looking “online to replace or supplement in-person instruction” (Chaker, 2020). As newspapers verified, “these pods—in which small groups of families pool resources to supplement or replace school learning—have become the latest flashpoint in the national debate around race and privilege” (Koh, 2020). The school closures and “pandemic pods” fueled feelings and fears that the needs of the haves were being met while “leaving out the have-nots” (Koh, 2020). It was in this context that I launched Tell-a-Tale.

I began Tell-a-Tale on March 25, 2020, conducting online, livestreamed (via Facebook Live) read-alouds and connecting with children through picture books. When I started, I did not know how long it would last. Nevertheless, I knew that I needed a space to connect with children. I missed them and the sense of connection that took place in the preschools where I had taught.

Initially, the idea was to read a book, engage those in attendance in some experiential activity (being fully present and in community), and invite those who wished to do so to engage with me via email or social media messaging—sending photos, images, and artwork. I chose particular books to highlight issues of equity and justice with young children. Participants submitted artwork, which was displayed in subsequent episodes. The sharing of artwork in response and connection to livestreamed storytelling sessions became a means to connect with educators, parents, grandparents and caregivers, as well as children around the world.

It was a simple formula, but the fact that this was a free learning space in the midst of paid “pods,” which exacerbated educational inequities, seemed to fill a need. While I was unsure of the resonance Tell-a-Tale would have, what started spontaneously lasted six months—or 55 episodes. Gradually the viewership went from 200 to approximately 3,000 viewers per episode.

Each of these 55 episodes concluded with a talk to educators and families who might want to use the selected book with young children and/or simply discuss topics such as race, immigration, gender, and socioeconomic inequities. These were circulating discourses—and so they belonged in Tell-a-Tale as public pedagogy. Each episode was between 20 and 40 minutes in duration, livestreamed from my home with the help of my alma mater, Teachers College, Columbia University, and advertised through social media. The Tell-a-Tale series had its series finale at the end of September 2020.

While Tell-a-Tale was aired from the United States, I produced it from Canada. It was promoted by the Teachers College events team and by me on social media. It was received in India, the United Kingdom, Nigeria, the United Arab Emirates, Panama, Canada, and the United States. As such, it sheds light on the power and possible futures for public pedagogical spaces of hybridity and in-betweenness—during and beyond the pandemic. It sheds light onto Nepantla as a site for public pedagogy.

SITES FOR CONVERSATIONS ON EQUITY AND JUSTICE

Engaging with social media and digital literacies, my purpose in starting the Tell-a-Tale series was to do something positive for young children in these troubling times. I wanted to reach out and make connections with children’s literature with a strong stance on justice and equity. Aligned with Ayers and colleagues’ (2009) three pillars of social justice education as equity, activism, and social literacy, my plan was to choose books that spoke about equity and diversity through an online platform.

I highlight books that offer insight into how books can serve as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). They take readers into a world without borders and full of possibility, a world of Nepantla, “where the outer boundaries of the mind’s inner life meet the outer world of reality ... a zone of possibility” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 544).

In reading picture books, I drew connections to my own experiences as a transnational woman of Color and created my own artwork, which I showed on the live broadcasts, inspired by the books. This invitation to engage with the books and create artistic responses was taken up by children and adults watching from all over the world and I received many pieces of art and artistic expression related to the stories I had read. For example, on June 8, 2020, I featured the YouTube video, *Animation Series: Something Happened in Our Town by Story Time*, which is a **Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center** program in conjunction with Atlantis School for Gifted Youngsters (#AtlantisBuild). This animated story talks about race and racism and how a family is discussing it with their children. I highlighted this video because of the Black Lives Matter protests that were taking place and to share resources for educators and parents to talk to young children about race and racism as they pertain to the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

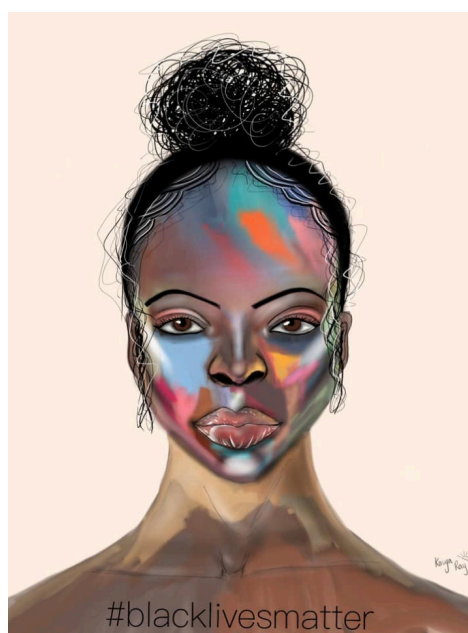


Figure 1. Black Woman by Kavya Ray

Kavya Ray,¹ a 14-year-old from Toronto, Canada, sent me the image of a Black woman (Figure 1) in response. In the following episode, I discussed Kavya Ray’s art and how she had used various colors, almost signifying an erasure of the woman’s Blackness. Kavya’s art served as a departing point to discuss how racism and anti-Blackness are not limited to the geopolitical borders of the United States, but global issues that need to be addressed by all communities. Responses such as Kavya’s added texture and voices to the Tell-a-Tale space.

1 Permission has been granted to use the original names and identities of all mentioned viewers except for Frida, which is a pseudonym.

Another response came from a 4-year-old viewer from New York. Frida (pseudonym) was very excited about the read-aloud of DK's First Animal Encyclopedia, after which I had shared a stick mask-making activity. I also shared some of my own experiences with animals. It turned out that Frida had two dogs and was an animal lover as well. She felt connected to me via Tell-a-Tale and urged her father to send me the photo (Figure 2) and a video clip, where she was excitedly dancing with the animal masks she had made.

These artistic responses from children, youth, and young adults pointed toward the impact and resonance of this in-between public pedagogical space. Through emails and private messages, I became aware that families were engaging in and continuing necessary conversations pertaining to justice, equity, and rights (whether it be anti-racism, animal rights, or climate justice). In this way, I saw glimpses of the reach of public Nepantla pedagogy in action. I saw this as “informed activism,” by which I mean that the children were leading the way to show the grown-ups what it meant to be resilient and adapt to a different way of communicating and connecting through the online platform.



Figure 2. Animal mask

CHILDREN'S BOOKS AS TOOLS FOR EQUITY AND JUSTICE

As an early childhood educator, I have learned about the value and power of children's picture books and how to critically examine them with a lens of equity and justice (Souto-Manning, 2009, 2013). As I began to envision the Tell-a-Tale series, I wanted to choose books that showcased issues of race and racism, colorism, gender bias, (dis)ability, and environmental justice. I saw the books as tools to foster sites for “young people's pedagogical encounters ... pedagogies that welcome people into caring relationships” (Nxumalo, 2021).

Books—and the stories they tell—are potential sites for the interruptions of microaggressions (Pierce, 1970, 1974), which are everyday enactments of racism and entangled systems of bigotry. And regardless

of how powerful the book or text was, I positioned it as a tool for critical literacy—for reading and problematizing inequities in the world (Souto-Manning, 2009).

The selection of books and how I read them and made meaning with them was geared toward this activism through social media (Hochtritt et al., 2017). Nevertheless, during the pandemic, access to books was difficult. Due to pandemic-related reasons (such as delays in shipments and library closures), I began by reading books I already had. The remaining titles I ordered online. These reached me at various times, so it was difficult to follow a particular narrative arc. Later in the series, I chose e-books to mitigate this issue.

Here are some of the books I worked with on the Tell-a-Tale platform, ranging from a focus on immigration, socioemotional learning, Indigenous/First Nations rights, and children of Color to how art can transform our lives. This is an approach to the selection of books that can guide early childhood educators in public pedagogies, as well as within the four walls of a brick-and-mortar classroom.

***Where Are You From?* by Yamile Saied Méndez**

This was the first book in the series—in which I discussed the intersections of immigration and race, and how we come *from* so many people, places, and things. It challenges the microaggression enacted by the question, “Where are you from?” and the typical follow-up question, “No, where are you really from?” It explains that geographical location is not the only identifier and that we need to think more expansively about a life that traverses the borderlands of multiple identities.

I used **George Ella Lyon’s poem *Where I’m From*** along with this book and created a simplified template for young children to engage with (Appendix). I received responses from children in Canada and the United Kingdom sharing their I Am From poems, which I featured on the following episode.

***No, David!* by David Shannon**

With *No, David!*, I wanted to discuss how as adults, we repeatedly tell children not to do things and use the word “no.” This was especially the case during a global pandemic, which added an extra dose of anxiety to everyday interactions.

For the connection activity, I made my own book using stylistic elements similar to the original book. In this book I drew things we could say yes to, such as washing hands, staying home, and staying safe. I attended to behaviors particularly related to the pandemic. I did this because I knew many children and parents were frustrated because they were staying home to stay safe. Many children did not have an open space to play or socialize with other children, which might have impacted their socioemotional well-being and mental health.

I invited participants to author their own “yes” books and communicated with a number of families who said on the social media chat how much the children enjoyed making them.

Rayaan Karunakar, a 7-year-old from India decided to make a *Yes, Rayaan* book and share it with me on a **video clip**. Another parent sent messages telling me that her daughter was busy making her own book where she could write about all the things her mother said “yes” and “no” to.

These conversations with family members were extremely important to me as I began to realize that multiple portals of communication and exchange were opening up. They offer insights into expanding

communication with families beyond what is traditionally employed in schools—both during and beyond the pandemic.

***Shi-shi-etko* by Nicola I. Campbell**

This book features the story of a child who is taken away from her Indigenous community to a residential school in Canada. It was important to read this book because the stories of Indigenous and First Nations people are not highlighted, even in forums that seem to be working with a diverse perspective and purporting to sponsor books by and about persons of Color. It is even more critical with the recent findings of hundreds of unmarked graves of Indigenous children on the grounds of former residential schools in Canada.

This book was very important because I learned a part of Canadian history I was not aware of. Being new to the country, I learned about how First Nations people in Canada continue to be marginalized, even though efforts for education and reconciliation are being made. Pointing toward the miseducation of many adults, family members reached out (mostly privately), confessing that they had never known about residential schools in Canada. Their reactions offer insights into the need for teachers to engage with more books by and about Indigenous persons everywhere in the world, and the need to repair the miseducative journeys of many adults whose schooling has been entirely Eurocentric.

***The Best Part of Me* by Wendy Ewald**

This book is co-authored by children who selected photographs of a part of their bodies that they love. The photos are positioned alongside short paragraphs explaining why they chose that part of their body and how it is meaningful to them. It includes children of many races and ethnicities, as well as their stories and connections with their bodies—and at times, the parts of their bodies that are most critiqued by dominant societal discourses (e.g., hair, nose). This was a way for children to see themselves in a book (their words are handwritten on the page and their spelling is left uncorrected) and to envision themselves as authors. It was also a tool for honoring the beauty of many bodies and body parts—despite societal standards of beauty, which have traveled across time and space yet remain deeply rooted in concepts of coloniality.

***Maybe Something Beautiful: How Art Transformed a Neighborhood* by F. Isabel Campoy and Theresa Howell**

This is the book I read for the last episode of Tell-a-Tale. Based on a true story, it tells the story of Mira, who lives in a gray urban community. The book describes how a neighborhood mural connected its residents and created a positive shared space.

This book was a good way to bring together the concept of Tell-a-Tale as a storytelling platform and as a place where artwork was shared. It also served as a glimpse of hope to transform our neighborhoods, communities, and futures into something beautiful. Being careful not to oversimplify the devastation and racial inequities exacerbated by the pandemic, this episode allowed me to invite children, youth, and adults to reframe their gaze—from risks to promises, from gray to Color, from despair to hope, from impossibility to possibility.

Inviting participants to shift their own gaze and reconsider their own positionality and agency helped to bring some closure to this public Nepantla pedagogy. It offers implications for the book and

text selections teachers make after the pandemic. It reminds us not to limit ourselves to books and stories featuring characters who identify as Black, Indigenous, and of Color that focus on trauma and oppression. It urges educators to center the joy, magic, and humanity of Black, Indigenous, and persons of Color.

REIMAGINING EDUCATION OUTSIDE A SCHOOLROOM

In the midst of a public health crisis and associated governmental dysfunction, I sought to determine my own function as an educator committed to justice. It was with much unease that I embarked on the journey of bringing people together, prizing the relational aspect of teaching and learning while attending to the need for social connections between strangers, considering macrostructures, and attending to the political public sphere (Ripatti-Torniainen, 2018).

My aim was to use the online read-aloud platform with children’s literature to create a space that could transcend borders and allow children and families to take up an active and an activist stance, creatively engaging with the texts and making connections with their lives from all over the world.

When I started Tell-a-Tale I did not realize that the pandemic would last so long, and that so many lives would be lost. Nor did I realize that what I was doing, a simple storytelling activity, would connect so many people globally. Through Tell-a-Tale, I sought to “reclaim or reinvigorate the public sphere” (Biesta, 2012, p. 683). The windows into Tell-a-Tale that I have shared here offer a situated representation of a public Nepantla pedagogy.

I was inspired by Arundhati Roy (2020b) and accepted the challenge to see this pandemic as a portal and reimagine, reinvent, refocus, and build anew. Throughout the journey, I learned invaluable lessons, both personally and professionally. I learned the value of adapting to change, even an unwelcome one. The pandemic gave us no choice. I also relearned the power of storytelling and how stories—boundless and borderless—are a connective force that can be used to create positive change. I learned how interconnected we are through social media and shared values, commitments, and experiences. Tell-a-Tale also served as a representation of how universities may use their platforms for the greater good, bringing people together and sponsoring programming.

The power and promise of a public Nepantla pedagogy is in thinking of new ways to reimagine education outside the confines of a school building or classroom walls. I hope the reimaginings offered here shed light on possibilities for you to fashion “transformations ... in this in-between space” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. xv). It is a space for reimagining, renegotiating, and reconceptualizing what education can and should look like—in the middle of and after the pandemic.

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Appendix

I am from....

“I Am From” Poem Template

Adapted by Ayesha Rabadi-Raol

Inspired by “Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyon

I am from _____ and _____ (names of family members)
from _____ and _____ (other people you love)

I am from _____ (where you live)
_____ (a detail about your
city/hometown – a smell, taste, or feel)

I am from _____ and _____ (food you like to eat)

I am from _____ (favorite animal/pet)

I am from the _____ (favorite toy or game)

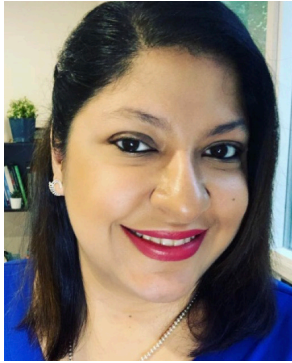
I’m from _____ and _____ (things you do with
your family) and _____ and _____ (family habits).

I’m from _____ (place of birth)
and _____ (family ancestry, nationality or place)

I am from love and all the people who love me!

By (name) _____ Date _____

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Reimagining Early Childhood Classrooms as Sites of Love: Humanizing Black Boys through Head Rubs and “Playin’ the Dozens”

Nicole McGowan Madu

I gave birth to my first child during the COVID-19 pandemic. The months leading up to my August 2020 due date were extremely lonely. I was already riddled with fear as a Black woman giving birth in the United States, and the startling reality that Black women like me “are two to three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). During this time, I also found out that I was having a son; my thoughts raced as I mulled over his future before he was even born (Figure 1).



Figure 1. My son

Despite my fears of bringing a Black boy into this world during uncertain times, and as the cries that Black Lives Matter continued to ring loudly, I was empowered as I revisited my research and listened to the stories of two Black male teachers working to foster positive relationships with Black boys. This was important to me, as Black lives keep being rendered disposable (Hill, 2016) and Black communities have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

As the American Psychological Association president stated in May 2020: “We are living in a racist pandemic” (American Psychological Association, para. 1). The killings of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Elijah McClain, Daunte Wright, and the countless other unarmed Black men whose lives were prematurely

robbed at the hands of police authorities have the nation's undivided attention (Chokshi & Engel Bromwich, 2016). It is evident that race and gender continue to plague the course of Black male lives in the United States. America is failing Black men in countless ways—Black men are disproportionately underrepresented in positions of power and images of success; they are overrepresented in roles associated with failure, such as incarceration, unemployment, and early death (Noguera, 2013).

It was as a new mother of a Black son during the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racist attacks on Black lives that I was drawn to revisit the practices of two Black male early childhood teachers. In 2017, I had the opportunity to spend time with two talented teachers—Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson (pseudonyms)—as part of my dissertation study on the relationships between Black male early childhood teachers and Black boys.

Reflecting on my time with them in their classrooms of 6-, 7-, and 8-year-old children served as a powerful reminder that we can help change Black boys' lives. These teachers' actions and interactions with Black boys led me to reimagine Black boys' experiences in early schooling. Their classrooms countered the construction of Black boys as behavior problems, as dangerous, and threatening—all of which are common narratives threaded in the very fabric of what we know as the United States of America. Instead, their classrooms were sites of love.

BLACK CHILDREN AND SCHOOLING AMIDST COVID-19

As I speak with friends and family members, it is no surprise that Black parents have been reluctant to send their children back to school during COVID-19. While there are a number of reasons, two of the main reasons have been identified by Ladson-Billings (2020):

- Health and safety: “Black children are likely to live in multi-generational homes” and thus may asymptotically “contract and shed the virus and infect a grandparent or parent with underlying conditions. Given the high rate of COVID infections and death in the Black and Brown communities, Black families are not willing to take the risk of transmission” (para. 4).
- The violence that Black children experience in US schools: “Black families are keenly aware that school was not the haven of comfort and safety that some professionals try to pretend they are.... School is a place where adults yell at them” and “can be a place of a special kind of violence” (para. 5).

As Black children return to schools—or maybe I should say in order for Black children to return to school—it will be essential to abolish this “special kind of violence” (Ladson-Billings, 2020). We can no longer pretend that the violence is not there. While health and safety are being considered and are concerns that will be abated post-pandemic, the violence Black children experience at school needs attention.

In this article, I respond to questions raised by Ladson-Billings (2020): How have schools prioritized Black students' socioemotional needs? “How have Black students' teachers conveyed that to them?” (para. 6), offering a counter-story to the violence inflicted onto Black students. In thinking about what schools can look like for Black boys once the COVID-19 pandemic is over, I am reminded that Black boys, like all children, need love and affection, positive affirmations, and teachers who take the time to know them.

I hope that the counter-stories I collected prior to the pandemic can lead others to offer a glimpse of what is possible. I believe we have the potential to inform how we educators reimagine the future of education

for Black boys across the country. After all, as Milner (2007) reminded us, in his study on the education of African American males in the United States: “Black male students can and are succeeding in all types of schools—urban included—and the time has come for those of us in education to stop making excuses and to teach and empower Black males to reach their full capacity” (p. 240). This is especially relevant for Black boys, who are too often excluded from schooling from the earliest years. According to the US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2014), Black children are three times as likely as White children to be suspended from school.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In order to explore how Black boys learn in contexts that have historically oppressed the bodies, souls, and psyches of Black (male) students (Du Bois, 1903/1970), such as schooling, I employed critical race theory (CRT). CRT allowed me to ground new findings in what is already known about the impact of racism on daily, lived experiences. CRT centers and appreciates the value of storytelling, a long-established Afrocentric way of knowing, to counter majoritarian stories of Black men and Black boys as pathologies to be remedied (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). It was from this perspective that I learned from two Black male teachers and one Black boy.

I also engaged Black feminist thought (Hill Collins, 2000), which allowed me, as a Black woman, to acknowledge my positionality as insider/outsider. Black feminist thought allowed me to empower the voices of the Other. It offers a site to highlight traditionally invisible relationships and experiences. Finally, it uplifts the Black woman’s position in creating community within African American circles. Understanding that uplifting Black boys empowers them to believe in their personal success solidified my decision to apply Black feminist thought.

METHODOLOGY

My research questions guided the methodological approach undertaken in my study: How are the educational experiences of Black boys in early childhood classrooms in New York City shaped through interactions with Black male educators? Drawing on critical race theory and Black feminist thought, my goal was to illustrate *other people’s stories* given the rich tradition of storytelling within the African American community (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

The study was conducted in a public charter school in New York City. There were three participants in the study: two Black male teachers and one Black boy, who was a student in one of the classrooms observed. In order to participate, participants had to self-identify as Black and male.

These counter-stories were constructed through a combination of the data gathered from two interviews conducted with each of the two Black male second-grade teachers (Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson) and a Black boy in second grade (Malik). The telling of their experiences teaching and learning together was coupled with 16 weeks of observations of their interactions. I served as the narrator of other people’s stories, which counter the dominant stories of Black boys and Black men. As Baszile explained (2015), “counterstorytelling is CRT’s *modus operandi*” (p. 239).

Through critical race theory, I sought to talk back via counter-stories, which “are, above all else, intended to interrogate and subvert the logic of multiple rationalities—legal, neoliberal, and scientific among others—and their role in reinforcing racism” (Baszile, 2015, p. 239), even if under the guise of

“good intentions.” By crafting critical race counter-stories, my aim was to fundamentally problematize longstanding struggles and power structures compromising the education of Black boys.

Observation notes were recorded on a three-column form. Themes were generated through the coding of both interview transcripts and observation notes. The interviews were coded first; in the interviews, empowerment, affection, making mistakes, and role modeling were mentioned by each teacher several times. These codes were then used to analyze the observation data, to provide explicit classroom examples of these themes in action. Below, I offer lessons learned that can guide us toward a future where early childhood education can affirm Black boys and suspend the harm and violence too often inflicted in and by schooling.

LESSONS LEARNED: ON THE NEED FOR AFFECTION AND SAFE SPACES

Early childhood classrooms are often deemed to be sites of warmth and affection, but these feelings are often not experienced by Black children. Black children are often subjected to rejection, treated as adults, and constructed as threatening (Ladson-Billings, 2011; Souto-Manning et al., 2021). This is illustrated by extremely high rates of suspension for Black boys in preschools (US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014); Black preschoolers comprise 18% of all preschoolers in the US, but almost half of out-of-school suspensions.

In both of the observed classrooms (Mr. Gomis’s and Mr. Richardson’s), the teachers expressed affection and warmth towards their students, and more specifically, Black boys, in a variety of ways. In many instances, head rubs and pats on the shoulder were observed, coupled with smiles, high fives, and shared laughter. Throughout this study, both teachers discussed how they showed love and affection towards young Black boys, and the importance of these types of actions in early childhood classrooms.

The following counter-stories focus on how two Black male teachers reimagined teacher-student relationships between themselves and Black boys. Also included is the voice of Malik, a Black boy who was in second grade in one of the Black male teacher’s classrooms. Central to both teachers’ pedagogies was the ability for children to make mistakes in their classrooms as they learned and developed. Black boys were not penalized for mistakes but were often given second and third chances, creating a space where the Black boys felt loved and respected.

The counter-stories were purposefully constructed to surface how Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson cultivated and sustained sites of love in their classrooms. They were braided through a combination of observations, interview notes from the teachers and the student, and an analysis of a student artifact. In hopes that readers will consider them in the moment, these counter-stories are told in the present tense.

HEAD RUBS AND “PLAYIN’ THE DOZENS”

Black boys often experience public shaming, which inflicts violence (Ladson-Billings, 2020). In contrast, physical closeness and playfulness—both of which have been largely missing amidst the COVID-19 pandemic—offer a site for reimagining the education of Black boys. These serve as counter-stories to the dominant story of Black boys detailed by hooks (2004): “We force our children out of the wholeness and connectedness in which they begin their lives. Instead of cultivating intimacy” we teach Black boys “to bury their deepest selves, to stop speaking, or attending to...the state of closeness we all, by our natures, most crave” (pp. 121-122).

Here are some insights from Mr. Gomis' interactions with Black boys, a site for noticing and noting the need for humanizing Black boys. The indented paragraphs are my counter-stories.

Head Rubs

The students are wrapping up a whole-group lesson on the carpet with the co-teacher, Mrs. Tisdale, and are transitioning back to their seats to work individually or with a partner for guided reading. As the students transition, Mr. Gomis is privately checking in with the boys in the class. As the boys move to their spaces, he quietly pulls them to the side. I struggle to hear what Mr. Gomis is saying to the boys because the conversations are intentionally private. Having noticed that some of the boys struggled on the carpet during whole group, Mr. Gomis is making it clear to observers that the boys are allowed to make mistakes, to struggle with sitting still (as most young children do), and that a redirection does not have to include public shaming.

Mr. Gomis offers reminders of the expectations sprinkled with phrases such as, "remember to try your best" and "I know you can do it." Mr. Gomis also expresses a sense of closeness with his boys, with pats on the head as encouragement, an arm around a boy's shoulder as he listens to the boy explaining his needs, and standing in a cradling position over boys as they read.

These interactions seem to change the power dynamics between teacher and students because although Mr. Gomis is standing over the boys, his leaning in suggests that he is having a conversation with the boys, as opposed to merely telling them what to do.

Mr. Gomis reminds a Black boy that he is a leader and that other students look up to him, as he high fives with a different Black boy who has been focusing diligently on his independent reading. The boys are seen within this classroom and they appreciate and reciprocate the affection.

In addition to physical closeness, Mr. Gomis showed affection by telling jokes, similar to what is often referred to within African American communities as "playin the dozens." Smitherman (1997) notes its similarities to the joke-telling of West African ethnic groups such as the Efik in Nigeria. Smitherman says that this linguistic-cultural practice has critical rules: "For one thing, the insult must be funny and original ... and, most important, it must not be literally true because, then, it is no longer a game" (p. 13). The tradition is rooted in "the surviving African tradition 'Nommo' and the power of word in human life" (Smitherman, 1997, p. 4). In participating in "playin the dozens," Mr. Gomis was preserving an oral language tradition, connecting and building relationships between teacher and students across the African diaspora.

"Playin' the Dozens"

At one point during guided reading, a Black boy seems to have allergies, which cause a string of sneezes. Mr. Gomis, who is now working with a small group, looks up at the boy from his table. He smiles at the boy as he jokes, "If you continue to sneeze like that, I am going to get sick and then I'll have to go home." The boy quickly and wittily responds, "No, you will still have to be here!" Mr. Gomis and the boy share a laugh at the teacher's threat to not come to school.

During my interview with Malik, he explains that Mr. Gomis is strict, but that he can be less serious at moments too. Describing the picture he drew of Mr. Gomis as an interview prompt (Figure 2), Malik states,

Mr. Gomis is a nice person, sometimes he likes to tell jokes. He's strict and clearly likes order. He tells jokes but they're not silly jokes, they are jokes about how he wants you to behave. He's nice and he's kind. He's caring and respectful. When students are absent, he looks for the children. This is a picture of him smiling as he is teaching. He expects a lot from me. I can sometimes have an attitude but he still respects me.



Figure 2. Malik's portrait of Mr. Gomis

Friendly banter between teacher and Black boys was also common in Mr. Richardson's classroom. During an observation of a read-aloud, I was able to witness the candid humor between Mr. Richardson and his Black boys.

Mr. Richardson is reading a book about Wilma Rudolph and Mr. Richardson begins a discussion on an era in American history when "people of Color were not treated equally." At one point in the story, the author explains how Wilma fought back against her bullies, who taunted her about her physical differences. In a very lively manner, Mr. Richardson begins in a sermon-like fashion: "Do you think Wilma is just going to lay down and give up?" To which the students eagerly respond, "No!" Mr. Richardson turns his attention to the Black boy who is seated near him with his hand raised throughout this energetic call-and-response interaction: "Yes, Reggie. You have a question?"

With a grin on his face, Reggie sheepishly remarks, "Mr. Richardson, I thought this book was about her running a marathon." Mr. Richardson chuckles at the student's redirection back to the text, saying, "We're almost there." The statement was not perceived as a sign of disrespect as the teacher has created a classroom culture where joking is both a form of communication and a tool for building relationships with his students.

Situated in the hallway outside of Mr. Gomis's classroom, once again talking with Malik, I inquire about things Malik enjoys doing with Mr. Gomis, which leads us on a journey of discussing math games. "I like playing math games with Mr. Gomis. They're fun and I'm actually pretty good at math now." Malik goes on to talk about some of the math he has learned from Mr. Gomis, including the use of a T-chart to organize place values.

Malik also expresses his love for counting change and we spend a few minutes counting the coins that he heard clanging in my pocket. It is clear that Malik is engaged by learning experiences framed as games, and this is something that I observed in previous visits to Mr. Gomis's classroom: he often played games with his students, whether for learning purposes or to boost the overall morale of the students and foster relationships.

I ask Malik to share any other games he enjoys playing with Mr. Gomis, and he begins laughing before he starts the description. Malik continues:

OK, there's this game we play in class, right? It's a jumping-jack game. Mr. Gomis, he likes to stay in shape, so he's always got us doing some exercise. Well, my friend Justin really hates jumping-jacks, and Mr. Gomis knows this. Anytime he wants us to take a break, stretch a little bit, he tells us we're about to do some "Justins."

At this point, Malik is laughing uncontrollably at this joke.

See, what makes this funny is that now the jumping-jacks are called Justins and the whole class shares this joke. Even Justin, he doesn't get mad about it, he laughs, too. Because Mr. Gomis can just be funny! He says it with a serious face, "OK class, let's stand up and do some Justins," and everybody just starts laughing! Mr. Gomis doesn't laugh, but we all know it's his way of sharing a little inside joke.

Malik and I laugh at his imitation of Mr. Gomis's strict face as he makes a joke in front of the class. It is clear that Malik appreciates his teacher's sense of humor and he feels closer to him because of their shared history of inside jokes. This aligns with Mr. Gomis's intentionality in building relationships through jokes and wanting his students to have fun in his classroom. This interaction, which started by thinking about the fundamental math skills Malik had acquired in Mr. Gomis's classroom, showcases how Mr. Gomis holds Black boys to high learning expectations, but in a way that expresses affection through jokes and laughter.

DISCUSSION

Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson understood the importance of creating spaces where Black boys could vent, joke, and laugh as a way of combating some of the societal pressures that Black boys experience on a daily basis. This is particularly important for preserving positive early childhood experiences for Black boys, a period when play is critical to the learning process.

Additionally, while both Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson displayed affectionate gestures towards Black boys, they also communicated their care by holding their students to high expectations. Both teachers are *warm demanders*, which Delpit (2012) describes as those teachers "who expect a great deal of their students, convince them of their own brilliance, and help them to reach their potential in a disciplined and structured environment" (p. 77). These counter-stories highlight classrooms where Black boys are

shown affection, are held to high standards, and are allowed to make mistakes, creating positive learning experiences that stand in juxtaposition to common crisis narratives often portrayed in educational research focused on young Black boys.

The counter-stories offer us glimpses of early childhood classroom environments where love and justice are braided in the actions and interactions between Black male teachers and Black boys (hooks, 2000; Johnson et al., 2019). As such, they counter pervasive narratives of Black boys as threatening and needing to be removed from classrooms, which justify what Ladson-Billings (2020) termed a “special kind of violence.” Importantly, they offer us a compass to suspend the kind of violence Black boys have experienced in schooling prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The narrative of Black boys being overpoliced in classroom spaces, and implicit biases against Black boys starting in preschool, stand in contrast to the counter-stories provided, which emphasize how Mr. Gomis and Mr. Richardson created loving and welcoming spaces for their Black boys, understanding that young children require affection in order to build healthy interpersonal relationships and strong feelings of self-efficacy.

As teachers of young Black boys, these lessons on shared love and affection modeled by Black men have the potential to impact how they perceive relationships with other Black men outside of the classroom—learning that Black men express affection in ways that are culturally bound to the intersection of being Black and being male.

Additionally, both teachers created space for their young Black boys to make mistakes within their classrooms without being unnecessarily penalized. Too often, the media portrays Black boys as Black men (Ladson-Billings, 2011), stripping Black boys of their childhood before they finish elementary school. This portrayal of Black boys perpetuates a school system where Black boys are punished at higher rates because they are not given the freedom allotted to White children of making mistakes and trying again.

In both classrooms, there were times when Black boys failed to meet the teachers’ expectations by either answering a question incorrectly, behaving in a way that did not meet the classroom standards, or getting off task during a learning activity. However, these students remained in the classroom under the guidance of their Black male teachers, which stood in stark contrast to the narrative of pushing Black boys out of the classroom. Both teachers were intentional in their commitment to dealing with any challenges in their classroom, noting that early elementary-school Black boys need to be able to make mistakes and to recognize that there are adults who are there to support them when they need a little extra love and care.

The counter-stories that were produced as a result of this study challenge the majoritarian story of Black boys’ hypervisibility in special education and absence in gifted education programs (Milner, 2007). Malik helped bring to life the perspective of Black boys in early childhood education through his appreciation for his Black male teacher’s commitment to and expressions of care, shared cultural background, unique communication style (jokes as a form of affection), and no-nonsense approach when Malik had a self-proclaimed “attitude.”

Malik’s educational experiences fostered social-emotional well-being, largely missing for Black children in US schools (Ladson-Billings, 2020). Mr. Gomis was helping him recognize his potential as both a student and a Black boy who will become a Black man. Malik mentioned feeling respected by his teacher, which in turn made him feel like a valued member of the classroom community. His teacher had taken the time to know him on an individual level and verbally (and unabashedly) communicated “I love you.”

Black boys, like most young children, appreciate respect, care, and loving gestures, yet these attributes are often missing in teacher-student interactions between teachers and Black boys in early childhood education (hooks, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2011). Young Black boys need teachers who are not afraid of closeness, both in the physical sense (sharing hugs and high fives) and in relation to taking the time to really get to know them as individuals.

IMPLICATIONS

If we think of the COVID-19 pandemic as a portal (Roy, 2020), we have the responsibility to leave behind unjust systems that inflict violence on Black boys. We must instead commit to love Black boys, as love is a requisite to teaching young Black boys in the pursuit of justice. After all, as hooks reminds us: “There can be no love without justice” (hooks, 2000, p. 19).

Black boys need teachers who engage in love as action—via their commitment to supporting their growth, respect, and affection (hooks, 2000). Indeed, “it is our responsibility to give children love. When we love children we acknowledge by our every action ... that they have rights—that we respect and uphold their rights” (p. 30). When we arrive on the other side of this pandemic, embracing this responsibility will be ever more important.

To accept our responsibility, we must understand that love is not simply a feeling. While affection is certainly an ingredient of love, love also requires care, “recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication.” This requires early childhood educators to invest their feelings in Black boys and challenge the “assumption that we love instinctually” (hooks, 2000, p. 5).

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the world to slow down, to value each day, and to cherish our relationships. As we return to schools, we must commit to suspending the special kind of violence Black children endure in schools. We must ground the future of education in really knowing the children in our classrooms. And we must accept our responsibility—and associated work—for reimagining early childhood classrooms as a site where love can be intentionally and actively chosen, each and every day. Our Black boys deserve no less.

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Shifting Skins: Becoming Multiple During Emergency Online Teaching

Bianca Licata and Catherine Cheng Stahl¹

At the end of March 2020, teachers across the United States, ourselves included, were forced to reorganize our rooms and prepare two weeks' worth of emergency remote lessons. We left notebooks on desks, projects hung up on walls, jackets that kids forgot to take home. We would be back, we thought. This would be little more than an extended snow day. But soon, we found ourselves jettisoned into a world where we could no longer *be* who and what we had come to believe a teacher *was*. Slipped into the in-between of students' worlds and ours, feeling our way across screens and voids, through the pain, desolation, and loneliness of isolation; through the outpouring of calls for racial justice in the face of heightened racism, violence, and political upheaval; through the sonorous drone of endless New York City and Newark, New Jersey ambulance sirens, we tried to reach our students. Yet, as we struggled to find our footing in this new and, what seemed to be, crumbling world, we saw neoliberal education, with its demand for high-stakes accountability and constant monitoring of student and teacher productivity, fold beneath the chaos, and saw our mechanistic teaching roles and restrictive student identities slip, slide away.

Ejected from this landscape of formal schooling, we found ourselves navigating the online learning space through a structure familiar to us and our students outside of typical learning space—that of virtual gaming. This unexpected relationality showed us the possibility of a learning environment open to multiple and expanding ways of being and learning. Yet, in the months that followed, we have seen a reclamation of neoliberalism in online learning and heard the call for resuming testing, surveillance, and controls when we make our return to in-person learning. In what follows, we argue instead that we cultivate the relationality we experienced in the game-like and game-infused world of emergency online learning.

CAGED INTO A SINGULARITY: NEOLIBERAL SCHOOL SPACES

We regard neoliberal education as the organization of educational practices motivated by capital gains and measured by (white, male, heterosexual) meritocracy, which inherently harms multiply marginalized communities (Kumashiro, 2000). Neoliberal education specifically devalues Black, Indigenous, and people of Color (BIPOC) knowledges and cultures by essentializing high-stakes tests that privilege Eurocentric ways of knowing. Rather than celebrate BIPOC students' multiplicity of knowledge and experience, neoliberal education claims an "achievement gap" between white and BIPOC students (Ladson-Billings, 2007), citing a need to implement character and cultural reforms (Coleman, 1966), marketing behavior management strategies (Lemov, 2015), and enacting a discourse of white saviorism that de-agentifies BIPOC/multiply marginalized students (Au, 2018; Brewer et al., 2018; Sondel et al., 2019; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2018).

Raised through the racist 1916 Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales and reinvigorated by the 2001 No Child Left Behind, high-stakes testing and accountability practices reinforce deficit approaches to

¹ This article has been equally authored.

teaching (Counsell & Wright, 2018). These practices simultaneously perpetuate feelings of self-doubt and of deference to authority within BIPOC students (Tuitt & Carter, 2008)—students who have been historically and socially figured as “ruining” lessons with outbursts and unsanctioned movements; whose racialized, gendered spirit haunts the classroom with disruptions; and whose energy has been constructed as “the physical embodiment of a deviance in the body politic that must be controlled” (Ramlow, 2004, p. 114). Heightened by increased school surveillance designed to control BIPOC bodies (Krueger, 2010), neoliberal learning spaces vibrate with anxiety yet purvey these everyday traumas as “necessary” for BIPOC folk to reach the “status quo” (Grant et al., 2020). As two women-of-Color teachers who feel valued according to our singular proximity to whiteness (Solorzano, 1997), we intimately recognize this anxiety as something we have internalized as normal and natural—rather than normalized and naturalized, exogenous to our natural inclinations, and beneficent for only a certain few.

Thus made normal, these structures have remained fairly imperceptible, under the radar, or at least underexamined. It took a dramatic shake-up of our ecosystem, caused by a pandemic, for the facade of business-as-usual to crumble, exposing the latticework of injustice and inequity historically built into neoliberal education. In this newfound environment, distanced from the typically surveilled structures of school time-spaces, our everyday classroom roles underwent a transformation—one similar to a space we’d felt before: the space of virtual gaming.

FREEDOM IN MULTIPLE SKINS: (RETURN TO) THE (UN)FAMILIAR VIRTUAL (GAME)SPACE

With physical proximity removed, and the eyes of surveillance blinded, the “(social) production of (social) space” (Soja, 1996) no longer relied on us to be teacher “machines” and “eyes” of accountability and to measure, castigate, and dehumanize for the sake of our and our students’ “success” in a world that moved us, gravitationally, to the margins. Bianca, who taught eighth-grade English Language Arts in Newark, New Jersey, serving Black and Brown middle schoolers, was suddenly unburdened of an encroaching New Jersey State exam. Catherine, a writing instructor working with first-year college students in Manhattan, no longer felt pressured to harangue them for glitching internet connections and digital absences. Yet this unburdening was frustrating: How were we supposed to *be* with our students and teach material without our capacity to measure, bind, order? Porous and vulnerable, we rode wave after wave of frustration, determination, exhaustion, and depression, grappling with how to navigate our and our students’ losses and pain alongside the call to continue teaching, continue building learning experiences.

But at the same time, this space embodied a feeling of openness to imagination that we recognized from our youth. It was there, in the middle of a crisis about *what we were supposed to be for and with our students* that we recognized the potential for a relationality constructed in experimentation, in play, in *becoming*. We knew this spatial relationality and had experienced it in our youth as a space into which we could escape, remake ourselves and our worlds, and *become* other and multiple. It was a relationality that paralleled the world of virtual gaming, where we could explore learning (with)in new terrains, side by side. And though we did not play with students in real time, we experienced an escape into a playful, frustrating, and complicated world, like those of virtual gamespaces. As teachers, we reflected on these parallels together, and learned through conversations with our students about their expeditions and escapes into the world of gaming.

It is not new that youth have escaped into virtuality simultaneously in search of and crafting self and community (see for example Abrams & Lammers, 2017; Gray, 2009; Ito et al., 2013; Wargo, 2017). And

while the charge has often been that gaming has little to do with education, there is a multitude of research supporting not only its educational benefits (Halbrook et al., 2019; Stiff & Bowen, 2016; Swain, 2007), but also its affordances toward fostering new forms of social organization (Ito et al., 2013), alternative ways of thinking and problem-solving (Gee & Gee, 2017; Steinkuehler, 2005), and confidence through its participatory and social core (Abrams & Lammers, 2017; Squire, 2010). These are all qualities we as teachers hope to nurture with our students. Not only this, the gaming world is an ecology rich with opportunities to construct new worlds (Squire, 2008) and new identities (Squire, 2010).

In the world of gaming, players can take up “skins,” or avatar versions of themselves. Similarly, players can move through imagined “maps,” or gamespaces, and even create their own. Both the middle school students and college students with whom we experienced this emergent virtual learning space dipped into maps and skins to escape from and (re)narrate the chaotic world around us into something new.

For some of Catherine’s college writing students, virtual games—coined as a “serotonin booster” by one—like the Nintendo life-simulation game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* became an extension of their physical lives. For students materialized in a “villager” skin, home-building and interacting with neighboring villagers took on new meanings during a time of both alienation due to social distancing and chaos and instability from disrupted learning environments, sudden sickness, and loss of employment. *Animal Crossing* was a site of healing and community, a site of play, a site of imagination and future hopes. Through building homes on “islands” and establishing reciprocal relationships with “villagers,” students attempted to write, story, and imagine the world in which they want to live and participate. Students’ game play during COVID-19 was a vision of life-in-the-making in relation to others.

For middle schoolers at Bianca’s school, the 2018 Inner Sloth game *Among Us* served as a place where students could collaborate, problem-solve, and transcend death in a time when so much death and destruction surrounded them. (Re)materialized as humanoid avatars, *Among Us* players fix a breaking ship as it moans through space while an “imposter” moves “among” them, taking lives. But in death, players gain new powers; death here is a new beginning, an invitation to know the killer. Players move through former boundaries, observing, and still fixing the ship (that never seems to crash). Students played voraciously, secretly, sometimes slipping codes to one another into Zoom class chats and across emails. Though death was threateningly imminent in both worlds, players in *Among Us* could get a do-over, a restart, a try-again, all the while wearing genderless, colorful, silly-hatted skins alongside other playful bodies. The perceived disruption, then, of *Among Us* into the “learning spaces,” was an act of liberation, of becoming-beyond and becoming-more-than the surrounding chaos.

And the worldmaking, narrative-bending, becoming-other architecture of these worlds did not remain contained within the gamespace. Indeed, week after week, we saw the amoebic structure of emergency online learning expanding, assembling, and (re)shaping the worlds we shared with our students. Our students merged their world maps with ours as they Zoomed from bedrooms, kitchen tables, public transportation—dimensions of their lives we hadn’t seen. Our homes, schools, and work blurred; private selves and public personas became entangled.

And *our* skins shifted too: We felt it first through a heightened sensitivity toward subtle changes, minor gestures, and shifts in voice inflections as we (re)attuned to pixelated versions of our students and ourselves. Behaviors formerly deemed “disruptive” or counterproductive in physical neoliberal learning spaces became “normal,” expressive, connective; they became a language to be heard and read rather

than silenced. Further expanding our language capacities, we played on digital whiteboards; shared at length GIFs, memes, music, and stories from our days; met before and after class; learned about Naruto and BTS; watched students dance; ate breakfast, lunch, snacks on screen and during class; played with feedback, lessons, language; listened to worries, laughter, sorrow; came to understand (and expect) black screens. We learned to become freer to expression, to play toward new ways of learning.

Commentators on virtual gaming have named the ingenious scaffolding of learning how to play the game while playing the game. This is particularly the case with multiplayer games, in which you join with a group of other players—sometimes known to you, but often anonymous—to navigate through levels in worlds that are, at least initially, completely unknown to you. Our game-inspired relationality with students in the (re)created world of online learning was just this kind of learning; it forced us toward a revaluation of knowledge and multiple ways of knowing that opened new levels of experience, new ways of approaching and understanding the process of writing, the discussion of literature, the labeling of what literature and writing could be. And so, we thought that as we shed the thick, neoliberal-callused “teacher skins,” we had welcomed back the “immaturity” of the new player, replete with the playful promise to become someone who understood, who knew, who could relate, could join in, and could play in order to teach learners.

Yet, while we shifted away from being neoliberal surveillers and producers, we never fully grasped our new skins because we were still, in this beginning stage, trying to construct ourselves as *teachers distinct from students*, and we perceived the play we experienced as facilitating instruction toward predefined standards. What’s more, we are privileged in our access to technology, to comfortable homes, to health care and family, and so could not fully relate to the loss and struggle that many of our students experienced. And therefore we felt ourselves slip, grasp, slip, always just on the edge of understanding where we were and how we were supposed to be with our students, who faced death, destruction, racism, and isolation simultaneously. As time passed, we knew we could not pretend and play our way through a skin of “relatability”—the virtual space we occupied had made this *impossible*.

A MULTIPLICITY OF SKINS: CONSTANT BECOMING IN THE THINNING SPACE

What we felt, then, was a shifting not into a new type of teacher skin, but into many fast-moving, always-changing skins, a constant and temporary transformation from self to selves. The game-like spaces of emergency online learning pushed us to (re)member what it means to become multiple, to embody more than a single Eurocentric measure of being, or, as endarkened feminist scholar Cynthia Dillard (2012) puts it, “to recall and rethink of again ... [and] put back together” (p. 3) our inherent pluralities of being with others—past, present, and future. We experienced ourselves as we/they, as us/them, as what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) has described as *nos-otros*. We felt a fluid, *horizontal*, and expansive relationality, entangled within our and our students’ human and nonhuman, digital and physical, material and conceptual entities, rather than a singular, vertical relationality.

Recognizing ourselves as immersed in a “plane of immanence” (Deleuze, 2005)—in which boundaries, distinctions, and definitions are dissolved—we ultimately felt what it meant to be phenomenologically queered by a space (Ahmed, 2006) and to more freely cultivate within it conflict, conversation, and community. We call this space of becoming a *thinning space* (Licata & Cheng Stahl, in press), as our skins and our power along with them were constantly thinning and changing. We were students, collaborators, (be)coming alongside as learners among (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007) our many, complicated selves.

We recognize this thinning space as an assemblage that could be invoked in various situations, including teaching and learning. Simultaneously, we recognize the danger in forgetting how to be multiple and, consequently, recreating those familiar, sturdy, yet oppressive fixtures that regulate our becoming potential. Thus, as we return to in-person teaching and learning, we assert that we must cultivate the *thinning space* to broaden our and our students' capacities, resist neoliberal confinement, and restore what it means to be(come) "normal."

SUMMONING THE *THINNING SPACE* IN PHYSICAL SPACES

More than a year after we left our respective physical classrooms, we are still navigating this strange learning space that we have come to know as "online learning." Yet, as time has passed and routines have set in, neoliberalism has begun to affix itself back on/into the bodies of learners and teachers, especially since the impending return of New Jersey State testing. Simultaneously, calls for a return to "normal" in-person schooling grow louder on behalf of "fixing the economy" and toward a return to familiar social habits. In the face of havoc wreaked against all, and most injuriously, against the multiply marginalized and fiscally unstable, a desire for a predictable edifice, for a firm wall, is understandable. But while many seek familiarity, "familiar" is not the same as "equitable" and "just." For some, beneath this call for a return to brick-and-mortar walls is a call for more control.

Yet, in sitting with the phenomenal collapse of formerly delineated worlds amidst COVID-19 and with the expansive, multiple possibilities of learning and becoming that we and our students experienced, we imagine future teacher-student relationalities expanding into an open world, offering all bodies exploration in(to) and underneath skins. We envision teachers as shedding—that is, as *actively thinning*—thick, neoliberal skins to become an-other learner alongside learners, embracing multiple ways of being, moving, and connecting (with)in an anything-but-normal space. We have seen dismantled the institutionalized apparatus of control that we as teachers had been conditioned to deploy against ourselves as women of Color and against our BIPOC students in the name of enlightenment. Point blank—we know it can be dismantled again, and we argue that it must.

Black feminists have always reminded us that change requires us to examine the context of our multiplicity (Evans-Winters, 2019), to awaken within the wake of former ways of being (Sharpe, 2016), and to (re)member the people and pasts so as to talk back to structures that bind bodies and to recognize our own "power in the process" (Dillard, 2012, p. 16). Likewise, teachers can situate the affective experiences they had as children alongside those experienced by their students. Thus, in recognizing that all beings share different and shifting multiplicities and contexts, and in wanting to honor this, we offer some suggestions derived from our own experiences to summon a thinning space into spaces beyond the virtual world. Looking to Dillard (2012) and her teachings of (re)membering, we look back in order to journey and imagine forward.

Emergency online learning began with no broad, sweeping plan, no measure of consistency, no grasp on what "virtual learning" must look like, leaving many children with limited or no access to learning resources and online coursework. It took family and communities coalescing in an assemblage of care, filling the spaces made and created by neoliberal divisions and isolation. We name, then, that *intentionally creating space for community must precede the thinning space*.

Once in the virtual world, occupants were still "embodied and embedded in [their] historicities" (Braidotti, 2018, 5:44) yet also part of a burgeoning assemblage of rewired power pathways. As entrants

in a game-like virtuality, we (re)membered ourselves as children, filled with possibility, and found ourselves and our students in constant unsettled identity-play, taking up multiple, porous “thin skins,” shapeshifting into new entangled realities (Licata & Cheng Stahl, in press). To summon the thinning space, then, requires teachers to acknowledge the commutability of multiple skins as opportunities to reflect on and (re)consider entanglements with BIPOC/multiply marginalized students and to *welcome resistance to the normative embodiment of neoliberal productivity and obedience*. Likewise, we envision thinning space curricula as a “relational ethics” (Eaton & Hendry, 2019) that *resists singularity and encourages students to explore new maps, learn new skills, collaborate, and embrace the certainty of change in the continued process of becoming*.

Affective attunements toward a thinning space invite teachers to reveal, put back together, and reclaim other selves—as sibling, partner, caretaker, “and ... and ... and ...” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)—in our work toward more just learning environments. Once they have been conscientious in a thinning state, teachers might also become more open to working alongside students in the inquiry, exploration, and worldmaking that is necessary. This could take the form of curriculum co-construction, learning agreements, restorative/transformative justice work, and, and, and ...

THE END?

It took a global disruption of life as we knew it for our society as a collective to pause and revisit the question of whom our current system really serves. In education, neoliberal temporal and spatial structures have only closed in around us, stretching into insurmountable barriers between teachers and students and between students and their possible futures, territorializing our social spaces of learning with epistemological binaries. Thus, it is critical to address the systemic oppression of children, and particularly of multiply marginalized children, bound by these walls, where a sense of freedom is only understood within the space of a tiny vessel. Informed by the teachings and (re)membering of Dillard’s (2012) endarkened feminism and Anzaldúa’s (1987) *nos-otros*, a thinning space invites teachers to engage in constant unsettled identity-play and to imagine how embracing our multiplicitous “thin skins” (Licata & Cheng Stahl, in press) can engender radical care (Hobart & Kneese, 2020; hooks, 2018; Lorde, 1999) and expand our and our students’ possibilities for becoming.

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Catherine Cheng Stahl is a doctoral student in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research explores youth identity constructions in, through, and across digital spaces. She engages in multimodal, ethnographic, and participatory methodologies to elevate youth digital identities by exploring the complex ways young people come to know and (per)form themselves in technology-mediated, connective worlds. This research interest stems from both her own lived experiences as a t(w)een immersed in virtual worlds in the early 2000s and her seven years of hanging out with Gen Z youth as a high school and undergraduate educator.

Re-Storying Ourselves as Early Childhood Teachers Amidst COVID: Toward Needed Transformations

Julie Orelieu-Hernandez, Patricia (Patty) Pión, and Rafaella (Rafa) Soares-Bailey

COVID-19 has shattered the walls of the school buildings. It has stripped its walls bare, reminding us of the shortcomings of a broken system. It has disrupted and altered taken-for-granted meanings of teaching, inviting us to reimagine education. More importantly, it has invited us to reimagine who we were—and are—as teachers and human beings.

We, three New York City early childhood teachers, Patricia (Patty) Pión, Julie Orelieu-Hernandez, and Rafaella (Rafa) Soares-Bailey, will share what the pandemic meant for us as experienced teachers and the irony of learning anew how to teach children. From these shared experiences, we have begun to form new ideas of collegiality, friendship, self-care, and humanity.

COMING TOGETHER

One could say that we met by happenstance; others might say that the stars aligned. Whether by chance or fate, we three found ourselves taking a class together in Fall 2020. While we were introduced by way of a group assignment, we quickly realized we were all experienced early childhood teachers of Color working in New York City classrooms amidst COVID-19. Try as we might, we could not separate the demands and strains of teaching in a time of COVID-19 from our class assignment meetings.

We met via Zoom, texted, and talked (Figure 1). And we continue to do so. After all, we were (and still are) all navigating unprecedented times and—in our own settings—experiencing eerily similar consequences of these extraordinary times. Initially, we found ourselves having side discussions about what teaching looked like in the time of COVID-19. Soon, these experiences were centered as we became a community of teachers making sense of teaching in the middle of a pandemic.

While the preschools and schools where we work were attending to shifts in schedule, communication with families, and other material consequences of COVID-19, we found ourselves needing social and emotional support as we were making sense of our own lives, emotions, and shifting demands. We yearned for community and support as we each sought to teach in equity-oriented ways but were confronted with the inequitable impact of COVID-19.

The virus hit communities of Color in New York City particularly hard, and we found support and understanding in each other. We talked about our at-times unique and at-times shared experiences of teaching in the early childhood classroom during the COVID-19 crisis, working with toddlers, preschoolers, and kindergartners.



Figure 1. A Zoom meeting

Although one might construct working in different schools and preschools as an obstacle, it was a key aspect of our community. It allowed us to understand some of the larger consequences of COVID-19 as resulting from a broken system and an inequitable society, rather than situating our experiences as unique to us individually.

(RE)MEMBERING IN COMMUNITY

Starting in September, we met twice a week via Zoom. Collectively we began to make sense of the ways in which each of our preschools and schools reacted to the crisis. We communicated with our respective staff throughout and made meaning of our jobs as early childhood educators. We each found ourselves unsupported by administrators—or at least unaccounted for—in dealing with changes of schedule, expectations, and teaching modes. We felt at times less-than-human, or at least that we had been constructed as such.

Talking about our experiences allowed us to dive into our feelings through several stages of the pandemic. Together, we worked to re-story (Freire, 2001) not just our practices, but our identities and roles as teachers, recentering our humanity. We realized that as early childhood teachers we rarely make the time and space to attend to our humanity, as we tend to center and prioritize the needs of the children we teach.

Yet in community, we came to understand that our own needs do not have to come at the expense of the children's needs—and they should not.

In this article, we share a collective memory of our experiences. Our memories were also what Dillard (2012) called (re)memberings; they provided an important site for us to (re)member ourselves and (re)

claim our humanity. (Re)membering allowed us to put back together “notions of time that honor and lift up the relationships that linger there” allowing us to “truly honor the complexities of memories” (p. 10).

Our collective memories serve as a guide for where we began the journey and where we see ourselves as peers and friends. In a way, they address Dillard’s (2012) call for us to attend to the meaning of memories for the teacher or scholar of Color. She asks us to “more explicitly and systematically engage them, (re)member what we have forgotten as a way toward healing not just ourselves but those with whom we teach” (p. 11).

MEMORIES OF THE BEGINNING OF THE PANDEMIC

“Teachers are building the plane while they fly it.” Just a little reminder to all my teacher friends, parents and children out there. We are all in this together. #bekind

Figure 2. Facebook post

At the beginning of the pandemic, we were worried about the health and needs of our families and community members, especially the elders. We were overwhelmed with the mounting obligations, fearful that we could lose our jobs. We each found ourselves navigating teaching in a way we had never imagined.

As the rug was pulled out from under all of us, schools, administrators, and teachers were forced to scramble. In the name of rigor and normalcy, we were expected to recreate our classrooms into a computer screen. As teachers, we usually forget our own needs to make sure children are having their needs met. COVID-19 offered no focus on teachers’ needs. They became insignificant; we became insignificant.

There was pressure from administrators to produce online learning experiences mirroring those that had previously taken place in the classroom. We had limited resources in our homes. While we were learning to teach online, administrators and school districts never took into consideration the time needed to create these cyber classrooms. In many cases, there was an expectation that we should make elaborate use of videos, slides, and various applications (such as Seesaw, Google Classroom, RazKids, Padlet, DreamBox, Scholastic LiteracyPro, GetEpic, and Remini), since “other teachers were able” to use them—without considering the unpaid hours these teachers spent.

Administrators saw the end products of a Google Classroom, without fully comprehending the time it took to create the items posted. Word study videos that were two to three minutes long required hours of preparation. Read-alouds that would have taken 10 to 15 minutes in person now required teachers to find, buy, and/or create digital texts. Time was spent attempting to offer learning experiences that paid little attention to the disruptions taking place all around us.

The mounting work pressures were compounded by personal, physical, and mental issues. In our homes, our respective spouses recognized that we were burning the candles at both ends and even in the middle. They often reminded us to eat or go for a walk. Our diets and physical activity were replaced with endless meetings in front of computer screens. The longer we sat, the more lethargic we felt. Our bodies were not equipped for the hours spent sitting down—affecting our shoulders, necks, backs, and tailbones. The parts of our body responsible for holding our heads up were overburdened.

In addition to holding our heads up physically, we felt the toll of the mental fatigue we experienced. The transition to being home all the time, stationary, without a real grasp of what our students were experiencing, compounded by the never-ending ambulance sirens and nightly illegal fireworks that were popping off in our respective neighborhoods, added to the mental fatigue.

As teachers, we were expected to carry on as normally as possible for the sake of our students. The system failed to recognize that as human beings we were not functioning within a “normal” setting. Our homes became our classrooms and our classrooms became our home.

One of our schools did not hold its first team meeting until after a whole week of online learning. Our experiences ranged from having little guidance from our directors to being micromanaged during multiple daily meetings, with no regards to our mental health and screen fatigue. Stress levels were through the roof. It was the first time we had been through a pandemic, but teachers were expected to lead the way, mostly without support, and still act professionally. Administrators, being pressured by parents, became increasingly prescriptive and demanding, requiring that we enforce “normal” classroom structures and expectations even while children had no structures for remote learning in place at home.

In addition, before the school closures, we had each experienced interpersonal struggles associated with trying to teach in ways that were different from “the way we’ve always done.” We wanted to teach in ways that prioritized justice. We had challenged—or at least questioned—notions that languages (Spanish and English) could not be mixed and that children were too young to understand societal injustices. We did so because we knew these were myths that served to maintain injustices and inequities in early childhood classrooms (Souto-Manning, 2013, 2020).

Online spaces magnified these struggles for each one of us. We found ourselves, in the midst of a pandemic, working with people who either were not supportive and/or did not believe in our capabilities as teachers. As a result, we found ourselves struggling and fighting with a pandemic, co-teachers, and ourselves. We worked with other teachers who dominated the space while devaluing us until we had mental breakdowns, experiencing fits of crying, bouts of sleeplessness and irritability. We were constantly working and somehow not getting anything done, leading to fights with our partners. We were expected to suppress these difficulties in order to continue our roles as teachers. We sought support, wanting to work with people who were mindful of our needs, strengths, and weaknesses.

LIVING, SURVIVING, AND THRIVING IN A STILL-PANDEMIC WORLD

After months of constant Zooming and pressure from all directions, we hoped we would get back to some sort of normalcy—teaching in a classroom full time with a full roster of students. Normalcy became an illusion. What we got was more clarity on how much teachers needed support. Two of us left our homes to teach in person and the third stayed within their four walls, counting on an unpredictable

system to tell them when they would be able to get back to the classroom. None of us could depend on the system. We had to depend on ourselves and other teachers.

We found each other when we had almost lost ourselves. The three of us ended up in a space where trust was thriving. We had respect for each other's teacher expertise while attending to each other's needs. We honored each other's humanity. We understood the words, "I need space," "I got this," "This is my strength," "I need a nap," and "We can't give a one hundred percent at this moment." We found a learning community that was not necessarily "professional" but was centered on honoring our humanity. We had a commitment to one another. We were bound by trust, identity, and experience—values which are central to a learning community.

Together we (re)membered our humanity. We opened up about our study, work, and love lives. And as happens in times of trouble, the openness of our vulnerability created a bond between us. We found in each other commonalities, differences, and most importantly, community. In and with each other, in relationships that blurred the categories of "personal" and "professional," we found the strength to continue doing our work.

We know that we can make it—and at times fake it, if needed—but as we discussed in our meetings, if the conditions of the worksite make us feel devalued, unsupported, and unhappy, our teaching suffers. The well-being and mental health of teachers needs attention, especially in light of the lack of access to mental health support in the United States. The lack of attention to our mental health has made our jobs and lives much harder. For us, it was important to find ways to provide support in this delicate area. We found that being there for and with each other, elevating ourselves as human beings and educators, was a necessity for teaching during a pandemic.

As we continue teaching during a pandemic and beyond, as we reflect on our memories and (re)membering in community, we ask administrators to take note: A strong teaching community nurtures strong teacher friendships. We have all been in professional learning communities that were not communities, that did not attend to our needs as human beings. If there is one lesson we hope others will glean from our memories, it is that early childhood teachers' mental health matters; our humanity matters and cannot be separated from our roles as early childhood teachers.

REFLECTIONS AND CALLS FOR ACTION

As teachers, we had to reexamine and shift our notions of what professional looks and sounds like. The pandemic has reminded us of the centrality of humanity, the essentiality of humility, and the role of relationships in teaching and learning. Perhaps before the pandemic, the focus was on covering the curriculum; the pandemic made us realize how such "covering" was stretching teachers thin. As a result, we believe that we have the responsibility to upend processes of erasure that harm, dehumanize, and exclude young children. And we realized we needed to have the same responsibility to ourselves. How does this change our future thinking and practice as educators? How do we move forward?

We were guided by Freire's *Pedagogy of Freedom* as we re-storied our teaching as a human act, keenly attending to how we might "cultivate knowledge that concerns the specifically human nature of the art of teaching" (p. 127). As we collectively reflected on our own teaching, we became aware that we might have been too easily discouraged. Together, we recommitted to uphold each and every child's right to dream and to be free. At the same time, we talked with each other about our faltering sense of self-confidence marked by our own questionings of our professional competence in this new space (Freire, 2001).

COVID-19 has shifted the way teachers teach. With COVID-19 infections and deaths higher in communities of Color, the pandemic has not only clearly demonstrated racialized societal injustices, but it has revealed the many flaws in the education system. It has forced us educators to rethink education and the professionalism of teachers. This pandemic gave us a chance to shine a light on everyday injustices—such as lack of housing and hunger—that are normalized by society but make our students, and their performance in school, suffer. By acknowledging these perils, we can begin a process of humanization of our students and their families, therefore better attending to our students’ intellectual and emotional needs.

As Freire (2001) wrote:

I am dealing with people and not with things. And, because I am dealing with people, I cannot refuse my wholehearted and loving attention, even in personal matters, where I see that a student is in need of such attention. (p. 128)

We found that even in the middle of a pandemic, encountering and witnessing “that very humanity is in itself therapeutic” (p. 128).

SUSTAINING THE SHARED HUMANITY OF TEACHERS AND LEARNERS

As early childhood educators, as we re-storied ourselves and our teaching in the midst of a pandemic, we recognized the need to truly see and acknowledge ourselves as fully human. We found ourselves humanizing teachers and teaching. This involved holding space to make sense of what we were and still are going through—not only as learners, but as human beings who are individuals and members of communities that have been affected in multiple ways.

As we move toward needed transformations, we commit to cultivating true communities, where teachers uphold and sustain our shared humanity. This requires the understanding that knowledge is relational and therefore gained through emotional ties. In the “new normal,” teachers should be open to such partnerships and strive for the education of the whole child and the whole teacher. Through partnerships with families, we seek to re-story our practices and ourselves.

We have each been transformed by this pandemic, not only by the children we teach (and their questions, interests, and families), but by one another. As human beings, we each have been able to find commonalities and emotional connection through Zoom meetings. As we talked, learned, and laughed together, we realized we shared immigrant stories and navigated the world multilingually. We also vented to each other our frustrations that teaching has changed so much in such a short time.

Through the process of these meetings, we have re-storied our own learning, co-creating a powerful space of collective self-care and well-being. Through sharing our experience of community, we hope to offer the needed push for early childhood teachers’ needs, priorities, and development to be re-storied. We hope our memories and process of (re)membering can illuminate the necessity and urgency of re-storying the learning and development of early childhood teachers, prioritizing early childhood teachers’ community, collective self-care, well-being, and very humanity.

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Taking Flight: Giving Up the Things that Weigh Me Down

Karina Malik

For the 1.2 million K-12 New York City public school students, their families, and their 75,000 teachers, the disruptions created by COVID-19 school closures created severe levels of stress and hardship. As a special education dual-language Latina teacher of Color, these disruptions have given me pause. They are a reminder of the workings of an inequitable system that lacks sufficient attention to the persistent stress associated with teacher burnout (Wong et al., 2017).

Let's be real: Teaching is a stressful profession. Stress is a problem that is particularly pertinent in special education. Even prior to the pandemic, "the annual attrition rate for special educators ... is twice that of general educators" (Wong et al., 2017, p. 412). COVID-19 has brought further declines in teacher well-being (Bintliff, 2020).

As a Latina teacher of Color working in special education, I have long felt the weight of professional expectations and responsibility. All this talk about the benefits of having teachers of Color for students of Color—and the studies that have documented these benefits—is powerful (Jackson & Kohli, 2016; Pham & Philip, 2020). But for teachers of Color already dealing with the fundamental stresses of being a teacher, it is critical to ask, "What kind of additional and unique pressures do these responsibilities place on us?" And, more importantly, "What kind of support is offered to teachers of Color navigating these pressures?"

While it would be easy to say that professional expectations and a sense of responsibility are imposed by others, this is not always true. For many of us, being a teacher of Color adds another layer of stress—not only the expectations that come along with it, but the hopes we have for ourselves as teachers. For me, my hope has been to suspend the harm that I experienced in schooling as a Brown-skin daughter of immigrants who was assumed to belong in special education. This led me to become a special education teacher predominantly serving Latinx children of Color, aiming to give them what I did not have—a teacher who recognized and believed in their wholeness.

And in the meantime, I was working (at least) twice as hard. As Ta-Nehisi Coates explains in his book *Between the World and Me*, I found myself entangled with the myth of meritocracy and pushed myself to work harder, striving to "be twice as good" (2015, p. 91) to compensate for the racism that too often discounted my expertise, preparation, and professionalism. In doing so, I experienced "the robbery of time" (p. 91) in other areas of my life. And my "own rules redoubled plunder" (p. 91). I knew that as a Latina teacher of Color, I had spent way too many moments "readying the mask" or readying myself "to accept half as much" (p. 91).

Despite the promises to recognize the importance of hiring teachers of Color for the education of all students, and in particular for the education of students of Color, it is critical to understand the conditions in which we work. I know all too well that, as Haddix (2017) underscores:

Simply recruiting more teachers of Color but doing nothing to change the current system would be a failure. Instead, this model would expect teachers of Color to come into a system that has historically failed [us] as students. Why would one expect this same system to do anything other than fail [us] as teachers? ... the blame for the failure will be on [us], teachers of Color. In essence, teachers of Color are brought in to address the achievement gap for students of Color, and when there is little change, it will be [our] ... fault. (p. 145)

I feel this guilt day in and day out. I often find myself working twice as hard to ensure the success of my students—predominantly Black, Brown and Indigenous Latinx. But whenever there seemed to be little change, I faulted myself. And this was already happening before COVID struck.

COVID-19 IN NEW YORK CITY

As New York City made decisions regarding school closures and openings in the face of COVID-19, the needs and norms of middle- and upper-class White families—the minority numerically, but a population that is majoritized and majoritizes itself—provided the compass for decision-making. When New York City schools closed and instruction was shifted from our school building in Washington Heights to the screen of my computer, any semblance of equity was ruptured. Unsurprisingly, the New York City map of COVID-19 incidence was nearly identical to those along racial and income lines (Tartar et al., 2020).

In New York City, as elsewhere across the United States during COVID-19, low- and no-income family members became relabeled as essential workers—delivering food and performing other “essential” services. For many of the students in my school, this had serious consequences that did not seem to be considered as decisions were being made about schooling. Many of my students did not have an adult available to assist them because the adults in their families were focused on survival. Reliable access to computers and the internet were a problem for many, as was finding a quiet place to focus on their schoolwork. Many older siblings were forced to juggle their younger siblings’ workload in addition to their own. In the meantime, wealthier families relocated to the Catskills and other suburban areas, seeking a reprieve. They contracted teachers privately to account for school closures, establishing “pods” that provided creative educational opportunity, outdoor learning, and extremely small “class” sizes.

THE BURNOUT TRIFECTA

COVID-19 brought about the trifecta that comprises teacher burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization leading to lower-quality teaching, and a compromised and negative sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1997). Teachers felt overextended by planning demands and uncertainties, which fueled negative and/or cynical attitudes and a negative assessment of self in relation to job responsibilities and tasks.

As I reflected on being a special education teacher of Color during the onset and first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, I paused to reassess the pressures and tensions I experience day in and day out. Wong and colleagues (2017) underscore the importance of these kinds of pauses and of reflection as central to intervening in and preventing teacher burnout. This is particularly important because teacher well-being has been shown to affect student attitude, confidence, and achievement (Price & McCallum, 2015).

I was inspired throughout this extraordinary time by Toni Morrison, who famously said, “If you want to fly, you have to give up the things that weigh you down” (1977, p. 177, paraphrased). I have been asking myself: What does it mean to keep going in ways that will allow me to fly, to soar as a teacher? What are some of the things I need to give up, the things that are weighing me down?

As COVID-19 closed schools in March 2020, it was hard to juggle ever-shifting and mounting work demands as personal and familial demands shifted as well. I experienced a pileup of stressors brought about by COVID-19 and its effect on my professional and personal identities and lives. This pileup is not an exception: “stressor pile-up is common in adults and has negative consequences for physical and psychological well-being above and beyond those of discrete stressors” (Schilling & Diehl, 2014, p. 73). It affected how I was feeling and doing. It led me to pay attention to the lack of support for teacher well-being and teacher stress.

COVID-19 brought about increased work demands and isolation. Social support became essential. But beyond teacher quality of life, teacher burnout warrants attention because it not only impacts student learning, but it particularly affects long-term outcomes for students with identified disabilities, as included in their Individualized Education Programs (Wong et al., 2017). Research affirms: “Teachers who experience burnout and stress should be provided with enough instructional support to ensure high teaching quality and student engagement as well as instrumental and emotional support to monitor students’ long-term progress, including monitoring IEP goals” (Wong et al., 2017, p. 423). This is because teacher burnout and stress are not problems of teachers but problems of schooling (Council for Exceptional Children, 2013).

SORTING THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

In her book of essays about freedom in the midst of growing authoritarianism, Arundhati Roy (2020) comments: “What is this thing that has happened to us? It’s a virus, yes. In and of itself it holds no moral brief. But it is definitely more than a virus.” Roy goes on to affirm that even in this time of despair, the pandemic has offered us “a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves.”

I am engaged in this rethinking as I embrace the pandemic as a portal, as an opportunity “to break with the past and imagine the ... world anew” (Roy, 2020). Nevertheless, to break with the past, we need to reckon with some troublesome realities, including education’s past and present harms, which have resulted in broken trust—especially as it pertains to Black, Indigenous, and other communities of Color.

Instead of yearning to return to the “normal,” marked by racial injustices, the dehumanization and disposability of Black, Indigenous, and people of Color, the devaluation of teaching, and the education industrial complex (Love, 2019), I consider what needs to be tossed—what was harmful and no longer serving us as educators—and what needs to be taken forward to start addressing teacher stress and burnout, not in a palliative manner, but as an ongoing commitment and investment in the teaching profession.

TO TOSS

Here is a preliminary list of trash that needs to be tossed if we are to fly:

1. The notion that teachers are “essential workers” in times of crisis.
2. A system that values individualism and competition over collectivism, and leaves teachers on their own when it comes to learning and evolving within our profession.
3. The trap of thinking that teachers’ independence is conducive to efficiency.
4. Punitive teacher evaluation systems that treat us as though one moment of teaching defines us for the entire academic year.

Each of these items in the toss pile exacerbate our isolation, justify our lack of social supports, and fuel the feeling that we are fighting a battle alone. They contribute to stress and burnout, which are too real for teachers of Color who are teaching in a system where the majority of curriculum, of teaching, of teachers, and of norms are White.

TO TAKE

As Arundhati Roy (2020) advises us, COVID-19

is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

As we move through and beyond teaching in a pandemic, seeking to travel lightly, we need to carefully consider what to take with us. Given the importance of addressing the teacher stress and burnout that have been exacerbated by the pandemic, these are prioritized in my “To Take” list.

I believe that teachers’ well-being and their teaching—both of which are closely related—would benefit from prioritizing and committing to fostering:

1. **Expansive Learning.** Our learning as teachers is reconceptualized as lifelong. This is accomplished by creating spaces for ongoing teacher learning and by humanizing approaches to teacher learning. On our learning journeys, we form learning communities rooted in the understanding that there is more expertise across communities than there is in any one person. This informs our commitment to horizontal collaboration.
2. **Horizontal Collaboration:** Horizontal collaboration is prioritized in teaching because it offers us a deeper understanding of both ourselves and our students as learners. In this way, we actively work toward collaboration with those committed to teaching as freedom and justice. This fosters community-centered teaching and learning.
3. **Community-Centered Teaching and Learning.** Education is for the community by the community. Involvement of the whole community, including parents, is facilitated to ensure that there is representation of all stakeholders. This would include holding meetings at different hours or providing what is necessary for parents to be present.

A CALL TO ACTION

If we rethink the pandemic as a portal, then we must act. The time is now. We must leave systems of surveillance that create stress and cause burnout behind. As we seek to take flight, it is essential that we actively engage in interrupting, challenging, and tossing the things, actions, and relationships that dehumanize us and weigh us down. This necessarily entails not only tossing disempowering systems and structures, marked by surveillance, but committing to and engaging in honoring each other’s humanity fully. In doing so, we have the possibility—and I would say the responsibility—to build a movement toward humanizing teachers.

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The Pandemic as the Time to Interrupt Harm and Foster Healing through Schooling

Jessica Martell

Amidst the onslaught of a global pandemic, in mid-March of 2020, New York state and local officials confirmed what many of New York City's (NYC) students, teachers, and parents were fearful of—that school buildings would be closed immediately and remain that way until more information regarding COVID-19 was available.

Instructions were given to all of NYC's nonessential workers to remain quarantined until further notice. Initially, I was relieved to learn that I would not be required to leave my home, limiting my risk of exposure to the virus. As an NYC public elementary school teacher, the spouse of an NYC public middle school teacher, and the parent of two NYC public school children, my initial concern was the health of my family, students, and friends/colleagues.

During the days that followed this announcement, teachers were asked to report to their school buildings sans students. The days were spent learning how to develop and deliver virtual lessons, contacting the families of our students, and picking up as many teaching materials as possible. Those few days were filled with uncertainty, with no one to rely on for definitive answers. Nevertheless, like every other teacher, I knew I had to do the best I could for my students in this unique situation.

I packed as many picture books as I could carry, all my students' contact information, and a few other supplies. I did not know how long we would be in quarantine and could not predict exactly what I would need for this new way of teaching. When I left my classroom, I felt incomplete. Although I had never done it before, I was to begin "remote teaching" on the following Monday morning, just one week after the decision to shut down schools was made.

I was certain that the situation would be temporary and that we would all return to "normal" after the scheduled spring break. I was wrong. As soon as I learned that I could not return to my classroom and was expected to teach from home, I fell into a state of mourning. I mourned the loss of "my normal" and struggled with adapting to this "new normal." I mourned not being able to see my students, my colleagues, and the spaces for learning and growing we created together. Like many of my colleagues, I was distraught when elected officials decided to keep schools closed for the remainder of the school year.

I worried that my students' learning would be interrupted if things did not return to the way they were before the mandated quarantine—that they would fall behind on academics and the social-emotional work we had done together. Many students did struggle with being away from their peers and some shared that they missed seeing us (their teachers). However, there were also several who seemed to feel safer and appeared more relaxed learning from home.

During one of our morning meetings, I asked my students what they thought about learning from home. Some admitted to preferring being at home because it was "calmer" and they felt safer. Seeing them on Zoom meetings looking relaxed and happy was refreshing but it also made me question whether the physical classroom space felt safe for all my students. I wondered, why don't all children feel safe and comfortable in my classroom? In our classrooms? In our school?

The responses from my students who favored the safety and warmth of their own homes should not have surprised me. Although I think of myself as a teacher who is pedagogically thoughtful and works to foster inclusive practices, I recognize that there have been times where I have been complicit with policies that exclude and harm children. Our school system has worked as a site of “fixing” and “rehabilitating,” creating spaces of hurt, trauma, and soul-breaking.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an opening for me to reexamine my complicity, embracing the invitations issued by scholars Arundhati Roy (2020)—to revision the pandemic as a portal—and Bettina Love (2020), who reminds us that we (educators) cannot go back to the way things were. Love calls upon all of us to use this time to radically dream for what is possible in our schools, firmly rejecting a long history of mis-education for Black, Indigenous, and students of Color.

REVISIONING THE PANDEMIC AS A PORTAL

The COVID-19 pandemic gave me time to reflect on what I missed about pre-COVID days, but it has also allowed me to acknowledge that schools were not serving all our students. As Bettina Love (2020) underscored, the way things were pre-COVID-19 did not work for Black, Indigenous, and children of Color (BICOC). In fact, our schools were failing our children. As teachers recognizing the effects the pandemic has had on our students, we can use this time to re-create spaces of learning that truly serve *all* students.

Arundhati Roy (2020) reminds us: “Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.” BICOC were being expelled at alarming rates compared to white students (US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016). The experiences of BICOC and their families were excluded from structural decisions and the curriculum. In NYC, BICOC were prevented from access to high-performing schools via admission policies that were created to keep those spaces white.

I do not want to return to that normal. That normal is not neutral, but deeply harmful for Black, Indigenous, and communities of Color. I have engaged with Roy’s invitation to revision the pandemic as a portal, carefully attending to what I want to take with me and what I want to leave behind as I walk toward and work to build an innovative future. Although the list below is not exhaustive, I hope it offers insights into the quest for schooling that is imbued with love and aligned with the practice of freedom (hooks, 2000).

BREAKING WITH THE PAST

In breaking with the past and reimagining the possible future of our schools as a place of belonging for all students, I will leave behind: the right to exclude in curriculum and in teaching; and practices that normalize trauma under the guise of “mindfulness” and/or “trauma-informed practices.”

I believe that as we move toward futures of freedom, justice, and liberation, we must abandon the right to exclude in curriculum and in teaching. Schools must be a place of belonging for all students. The notion that “this isn’t the right placement for this child” or “this child needs more structure” not only excludes children from their classrooms but implicates them as the problem and excuses our schools and the school system in which racism pervades. Schools must educate students and sustain the practices developed in the families and communities to which they belong. Since this is seldom the case, changes must be made to schooling structures.

We must interrupt “mindfulness” and “trauma-informed practices” that normalize trauma, that teach our students to accept a history of trauma and ongoing harmful behaviors (such as the devaluation of their communicative practices). Teaching BICOC to control their bodies as a behavior management tool is what Dr. Angel Acosta refers to as “white supremacy with a hug.” Normalizing “appropriate” ways of responding to injustices and techniques for self-regulating perpetuates white ideals of what are deemed “appropriate” and “acceptable” behaviors. The mindfulness methods taught in our schools have been taken up by the upper middle class and exclude the meditating ways of Black and Latinx families who statistically are more religious than the white Americans who are imposing these mindfulness rituals. For example, white-ified notions of yoga and meditation are centered, while the healing practices linked to spirituality and the botánicas of El Barrio (where I teach) are marginalized.

IMAGINING THE FUTURE ANEW

In moving toward and working to build a future that does not yet exist, I take with me a firm commitment to the abolition of anti-Black racism, to ensure schools as sites of belonging for BICOC, to abolishing categories and labels that serve to exclude and diminish. I seek to help construct a future where restorative justice (Zehr, 2015), healing (Acosta, 2020), and love (hooks, 2000) are as pervasive in schooling as white supremacy is in 2020.

In imagining the future anew, we must engage in social-emotional learning that is rooted in the abolition of anti-Black racism. That is, in addition to addressing the social-emotional needs of our students, we must address how systemic racism has caused and continues to cause emotional harm to our students and their families. We must engage in healing practices that will serve our BICOC. This necessarily entails a commitment to schooling as education and education as sites of belonging for BICOC. This is predicated on an acknowledgment that schools belong to communities. If our students, their families, and people—their voices, values, practices, and priorities—aren’t centered in schools, let’s change our mindset and rethink what is required and how we are working alongside them.

As we seek to imagine the future anew, let’s commit to abolishing categories of exclusion. This means that deficit conversations about children will no longer be part of our repertoires or of schooling discourses. Statements that include “doesn’t belong,” “needs a different setting,” “is behind,” “can’t learn here” will no longer be heard. We will stop pushing kids out and (re)commit to including them in our teaching, learning from and with them.

This will allow us to build a movement toward a collective commitment to restorative justice, which acknowledges that when harms are inflicted, needs are created (Zehr, 2015). Whether these harms were inflicted before children entered school(s), it is our responsibility to address the needs created. When students walk into our classrooms, we will acknowledge and sustain their full humanity.

We will engage healing pedagogies regardless of when, where, or how the harms done to our students were created. This will allow for schools to move from spaces where trauma is inflicted and harm is normalized to spaces where healing is centered and where love is ever-present. With the acknowledgment that “there can be no love without justice” (hooks, 2000, p. 19), we will continuously ask ourselves: “Are we engaging in social love or the for real, for real kind of love?” We will commit and recommit to the for real, for real kind of love.

AN INVITATION

Taking Roy's invitation to revision the pandemic as a portal (2020), I invite you to do the same—to interrupt injustice and foster justice, with the aim of radical love, justice, and liberation. As teachers, we must reclaim this time as an opportunity to go beyond rethinking and head toward redoing and restructuring our assumptions, beliefs, pedagogies, conceptualizations of learning, views of communities, and practices and approaches to schooling. As the communities we serve and live in struggle with a triple pandemic (health, racial, and financial), we must position the following questions as a moral and ethical compass for our teaching:

What must we do now to get it right?

How do we become a part of the necessary healing our students are owed?

How do we ensure that all students see their classrooms and schools as places of belonging?

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An Invitation to Imagine Education Otherwise

Grasilel Esperanza Díaz

Dear Fellow Teacher,

Hi! My name is Grasilel Esperanza Díaz. I am a special education teacher at PS 75, a public school in New York City. I am also the mother of three public school educated children. I myself am a former student of the New York City public school system. This is all to say that I have experienced the New York City public school system from a number of vantage points.

At the age of 7, I immigrated to the South Bronx from a small town on the south side of the Dominican Republic. I know firsthand how racism and colorism cause trauma in young children and their families. Because of my own experience in New York City schools, by the time I was 8 years old, I knew I wanted to become a bilingual teacher. Even at that age, I recognized that teachers played a pivotal role in my relationship with education.

Even as a young child, I knew that I did not want my future students to feel inferior or think of their families as disposable. I did not want them to internalize racism and colorism to fit in, to belong. I entered teaching because I wanted to communicate to them, through my everyday actions, that they belonged, that they were enough.

Despite my commitments, throughout the years, I became complicit in some of the ways that schools work to exclude children like me. COVID-19 allowed me the opportunity to question my complicity and to recommit to enacting change.

Today, I am inspired by my students, my community, and so many educators near and far. As I recommit to change, I invite you to commit to change—or at least to envision it—and travel to 2030 with me to see what might be possible if we abandon the long-enduring structures that constrain and dehumanize our students, their families, and their communities.

Close your eyes and open your mind. Take a deep breath and imagine a school where all children are encouraged to be children, to make mistakes, to play, to learn, to grow without fear for their lives—without being racialized, marginalized, and punished. We would abandon consequences for behavioral infractions that discipline and punish young children in racialized ways (US Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2016).

Instead of having punitive aims characteristic of the criminal system (Zehr, 2015), when we react to behaviors we would move to analyzing behaviors as symptoms of wrongs inflicted, learning from them and seeking to identify restorative actions needed and embrace our responsibility to right wrongs, to sponsor justice. We would seek to address harms by encouraging empathy and responsibility and transforming shame into transformative action (Zehr, 2015). Instead of asking what rules have been broken, who broke them, and what they deserve, we would instead ask: “Who has been harmed? What are their needs? Whose obligations are these?” (Zehr, 2015, p. 31).

Adopting a restorative justice perspective, which understands that infractions are signs of a violation of

rights that creates obligations, we would focus on addressing the situation of victims of those students who had been harmed by a long history of racism, colorism, and entangled injustices in this country, “healing for the harms that contributed to their offending behavior, including personal and historical traumas” (Zehr, 2015, p. 25).

Acknowledging the genius in every child (Muhammad, 2020), we would center their competencies and assets—and reject notions to pathologize them, their families, and communities. And then we would attend to their belonging in the classroom and school communities. Our central focus would not be to seek to punish violations of rules or to foster guilt and impose punishment; instead, we would seek to repair harm. Imagine working together with families and committing not to racialize behaviors and how we label them in ways that pathologize Black and Brown children.

For this to happen, we teachers need to shift our perspective, our gaze, our actions, and our commitments. We need to look within ourselves, analyze our lessons, problematize the curriculum, taking stock of our classroom and school environment, and then ask ourselves: Did I plan for enough time for children to truly share ideas, thoughts, and questions? Whose needs and questions are guiding the time I allocate to activities? Did I appeal to my students’ identities, practices, interests, experiences? Did I communicate to each of them that they matter?

Imagine looking into each child’s eyes, engaging with them, listening to them, and learning from them each and every day. Imagine taking the time needed to truly and fully get to know all of our students. Imagine having the dedicated time to get to know our families—our extended classroom community—including elders, experts. Imagine committing to building trust, relationships, and community with them. Imagine recognizing that this would be the work at the very foundation of our classrooms and schools, of our teaching and learning.

COVID-19 taught me that we need to start the year off with the most important part of teaching: our students. They need to be centered in our plans, in our practices, in our curriculum. It taught me that tantrums and misbehaviors are children’s ways of communicating; they are part of children’s development and of their methods of communication. As such, they should be seen as something expected of young children’s learning and not as anomalies. This means that as teachers and school staff, we would work together with families to help young children develop multiple modes of communication, multiple ways to convey their emotions and their feelings.

I invite you to imagine a school where we recognize that society has caused harm to our students, and instead of trying to exempt ourselves, we can reckon with our complicity and responsibility, committing to transformative action. Imagine joining with families and communities, putting our heads together to work on repairing that harm, reenvisioning schools as sites for healing. This work would be on the front lines of our agendas—not viewed as something we might get to later on in the year if we have time. This work would have to be collaboratively planned with our families—the real experts on the children we get to teach. It would have to be centered around healing and building trust.

This work would take courage. It would include all of our students and also include all school staff—administrators and everyone else who interacts with our students and their families. We as a community would commit to it because we knew that it was the most important and central part of our renewed education plan.

I imagine our schools taking responsibility for the damage that has already been done and making equitable commitments as part of a reparations plan to compensate for the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) schools owe Black and Brown students, their families, and communities; a sort of reparation.

Schools and community centers would be spaces where racial injustices were centrally explored, interrogated, and abolished. This would mean abolishing police and metal detectors, replacing them with counselors and social workers. This would entail saying goodbye to the all-too-common practice of suspending students. As I reflect on the inequities uncovered by COVID-19, I know that we need to leave all of that behind.

Imagine looking at behaviors inquisitively, as an expression of a child's feelings and not as a reason to exclude. This means working to validate those feelings instead of seeking to push those feelings out; to recognize that human beings have feelings. Imagine establishing ethical and professional norms (Campano et al., 2015) rooted in commitments to belonging, to inclusion, to equity, and to justice. This means that children's rights to education should be honored; children should not be excluded from activities or classrooms due to behavior concerns or any other school-related issues like missing classwork, missing homework, not participating, or not attending class. These norms would grow from a common commitment to abolish all forms of punishment.

Imagine approaching education with a positive attitude, with an "at-promise" mindset: education focused on cultivating and sustaining the worth and the brilliance of our students (Delpit, 2012). The kind of education or school where any deficit mindset that communicates that Black and Brown children are lesser than, inferior, insufficient, or broken would be dismantled, abolished. Instead, we must engage in educating children by focusing on what they can do, who they are—their assets, their strengths, and interests. These would be the foundation of the co-creation of curriculum and upholding high expectations combined with high levels of support (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Finally, we would come together to interrupt the overrepresentation of Black and Brown students in special education while offering needful support, honoring students' ways of making meaning and making sense. Instead of seeking to fix students, we would focus on repairing the system. We would focus on our own identity development and engage in ongoing self-reflection, commit to empowering students by developing, maintaining, and sustaining relationships. We would construct knowledge together with our students, their families, and communities. Importantly, we would employ assessments to give us information about what students can do and what changes we need to engage with in our own teaching (Vigil, 2018).

We know that students make connections to their learning when they see themselves, their practices, their experiences, their families, and their communities in our classrooms, books, and curriculum; there are lots of examples we can learn from (Souto-Manning, 2020; Souto-Manning et al., 2018). These connections are vital to building trust, and trust is the first step in building authentic relationships with our students, their families, and their communities.

Now, stop imagining. Let's reflect on 2020. Let's redesign our schools, classrooms, and the ways we interact with our students, their families, and the community writ large. We have already tried tweaking the existing norms within our schools. As I reflect on 2020 and the changes brought about by COVID-19,

I now know that it is not enough to change some areas of the curriculum. These small ripples are no longer enough. We need to engage in “tearing down old structures and ways of thinking” and in “forming new ideas, new forms of social interactions, new ways to be inclusive, new ways to discuss inequity and distribute wealth and resources” (Love, 2019, p. 88).

We had been told it was impossible for all of our students to have technology or Wi-Fi at home. Responding to COVID-19 quickly showed us it was possible. While COVID-19 brought about much trauma, it also opened up the possibility for imagining an other future. Another future is not only possible but necessary. We need “new ways to resist, new ways to agitate,” as well as “new ways to reach children trying to recover from the educational survival complex, new ways to show dark children they are loved in this world” (Love, 2019). We need to once again find the humanity central to teaching.

Like Roy (2020), I too believe that nothing could be worse than to return to normalcy marked by racial injustice, classrooms as sites of trauma, and schools as enactments of the carceral state (Annamma, 2016). As Love (2019) wrote, “Education can’t save us. We have to save education” (p. 88). And the time is now. If not us, then who? If not now, then when?

Will you join me as we reimagine education and build a future that does not yet exist? I hope so. Our futures, our children, and their futures depend on it. And, as poet June Jordan reminds us, “We are the ones we have been waiting for.”

Thank you!

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Remember, Reclaim, Restore: A Post-Pandemic Pedagogy of Indigenous Love in Early Childhood Education

Trisha L. Moquino and Katie Kitchens

In many ways, COVID-19 has uncovered what we've always known: The structures and systems that shape the United States are built on White supremacy. Early childhood education is no different; it is deeply rooted in anti-Indigeneity. Inviting educators to envision the pandemic as a portal and rejecting the notion of a return to the White supremacy inculcated in young children from the earliest years by American schooling, we reflect on the need to leave behind White supremacy and systems of oppression. We take with us spaces of resistance and the resolve to engage in intentional acts of solidarity whereby White non-Indigenous educators take on responsibility to uproot anti-Indigeneity in early childhood education. Although anti-Indigeneity is longstanding, we see the pandemic as a portal to center pedagogies of Indigenous love in early childhood education. To do so, in this paper, two early childhood educators, one Indigenous (Kewa, Cochiti, and Ohkay Owingeh Pueblos) and one White, name the legacy of harm perpetuated in early childhood classrooms and preschools and articulate a vision for “a Pedagogy of Indigenous Love.”

Trisha Moquino and Katie Kitchens, co-authors of this paper, are co-teachers in the Keres Children's Learning Center (KCLC), a school dedicated to revitalization of the Cochiti Keres language. Keres is one of five languages spoken among the 19 Pueblo Indigenous Nations in New Mexico, and Cochiti Keres is fluently spoken by about 100 people in the world. This paper explores the role that critical love has played in the affirmation of Indigenous young children, families, and communities prior to, amidst, and beyond COVID-19.

Here, when the pronouns “I,” “we,” “us,” and “ours” are used, Trisha is sharing her stories and the stories of her people. Katie's contributions speak to the need for responsibility-taking among non-Indigenous early childhood educators and other stakeholders to uproot anti-Indigeneity. Co-authoring this paper is an intentional act of solidarity; the solidarity we need to imagine in a new world, where anti-Indigeneity is part of the past and a Pedagogy of Indigenous Love becomes the norm in early childhood education.

A PEDAGOGY OF INDIGENOUS LOVE

My grandparents taught us love, generosity, kindness, the importance of family, hard work, and respect, the importance of our Keres language. Those values are what grounded me. Those values ground our children. Those values ground the tribal nations I come from. And those values should be prevalent in early childhood programs in our Tribal Communities.

Early childhood environments which center whiteness implicitly and explicitly denigrate the languages and cultures of Indigenous children, chipping away at the sense of safety and protection offered by their communities and families as they are beginning to build their sense of either trust or mistrust in the world. Indigenous histories, language, and love are all but absent from the “data banks and dead ideas”

(Roy, 2020) that propel the work of American schools from the earliest years. Schooling in America has marginalized, violated, and devalued Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), furthering the legacy and ongoing realities of systemic racism for BIPOC children.

Against the backdrop of a devastating pandemic that has unnecessarily taken the lives of hundreds of thousands of people living in the US, unrelenting anti-Indigeneity is visible in the disproportional impact of COVID-19. The pandemic also reflects the ways in which there has always been resistance to White supremacist systems of oppression in our communities. We have seen the legacy of this resistance in mutual-aid, in sustained protests and organizing, and within the walls of schools dedicated to liberatory practice. Recognizing that when regarded as a portal COVID-19 offers an opportunity to reimagine American schools, we take this time to share a Pedagogy of Indigenous Love as a post-pandemic pedagogy for American schools. In doing so, we offer insights into our sacred ways of talking, being, and knowing. We do so in hopes of inspiring a break with the past, which has sponsored anti-Indigeneity in and through American schools, and centering Indigenous love.



Figure 1. Keres children's learning center students

A Pedagogy of Indigenous Love engages with Pueblo-Revolt-style radical love and begins with truth telling about the ongoing realities of settler colonialism, anti-Blackness, and anti-Indigeneity as visible in systemic racism and economic exploitation. It requires challenging White supremacy at its foundation and in early childhood education. Remembering, reclaiming, and restoring are central. Loving resistance has been a guiding force for Indigenous communities dedicated to language revitalization, sustaining our practices, our ways of communicating, our values, and our identities. Here, we review three key tenets of a Pedagogy of Indigenous Love: *remembering, reclaiming, and restoring* in the context of the Keres Children's Learning Center (KCLC).

REMEMBERING

In her book *To Educate the Human Potential*, Maria Montessori (1991) wrote:

let us give [them] ... a vision of the whole universe. The universe is an imposing reality and an answer to all questions. We shall walk together on this path to life, for all things are part of the universe, and are connected to each other to form one whole unity. (p. 9)

KCLC has chosen to use the Montessori method as a tool for our work because of the ways in which it aligns with our values around reverence for the child, care for the community, and responsibility-taking. The Montessori method offers the opportunity for children to cultivate independence so that they can develop their own unique talents, which they will use in service of the community. The rigorous pedagogy also allows a strong academic framework, freeing us up to spend more time creating the language and culture lessons that are the most important aspect of KCLC's work. While we appreciate Montessori for the freedom that it grants us, we also recognize that the ideas that Maria Montessori codified were not always her own—they are values and approaches to learning that have been held by many Indigenous peoples for millennia. At KCLC, we reclaim these practices in and through our teaching.

Maria Montessori believed in opening each school year with what she called “Great Stories,” which were intended to provide children with a sense of their place as humans within history and the universe. While inclusive in its theory, in practice each of the Great Stories presented by Maria Montessori and taught in Montessori training programs today apply Eurocentric understandings of the universe, of life, and of humanity. As a way of de-centering Whiteness, Trisha, the founding Keres-speaking elementary guide, and Katie, the English-speaking elementary guide, decided to reimagine a central component of the Montessori elementary classroom: the Great Stories.

We introduced the story of the Pueblo Revolt as a Great Story, focusing on the history of Pueblo people as a legacy of resistance, resilience, rebellion, and love for future generations. We told the students: On August 10, 1680 our Ancestors enacted the Pueblo Revolt, the earliest successful rebellion by Indigenous people in the United States, during which our ancestors drove out the Spanish conquistadors and settlers for 12 years. This revolt was an act of love for their people and their way of life. An act of love for future generations to know who we are and what we value. An act of love which was not soft or passive, but a love that stood firmly for justice.

At KCLC, we helped children to see this love through our yearlong study of the Pueblo Revolt. We reminded our children that continuing to learn and speak their language every day is a demonstration of the love their ancestors enacted.

At KCLC, The Great Story of the story of the Pueblo Revolt is first told by Trisha through Keres language immersion, and then touched upon in English by Katie. As Trisha first told this Great Story, the children were enthralled, inspired, and emboldened. At the end of that day, when children were sharing what they were grateful for, one student excitedly proclaimed, “I’m glad our people won the Pueblo Revolt!” This spirit of resistance and resilience that is part of the cultural intuition (Bernal, 1998) of Indigenous peoples continues to manifest through the existence of schools centered around the reclamation of Indigenous children’s education.

At KCLC, the lessons are taught not only by teachers, but by Pueblo elders as well. Pueblo elders offer invaluable intergenerational wisdom at KCLC. As respected teachers in the Pueblo, they remind our

children that tending to plants is like caring for children—plants, like children, need to be loved, nurtured, watered, have good soil and constant tending. This kind of intergenerational teaching is an example of a Pedagogy of Indigenous Love in practice.

RECLAIMING

The work that KCLC does is not new, it is not something that we are inventing. It is the way that our people have loved and cared for our children long before colonization. As Dr. Joseph Suina (Cochiti Pueblo) says, “We did not come to America, America came to us.”

KCLC is a place of hope because it is a place of reclaiming that which is already ours. It is a place to practice and embody generosity as demonstrated to us every day by the language of our elders who work with our children and our staff. A place where our children can value, honor and know what matters to our people: generosity and caring for one another and holding dearly to and honoring our ceremonies, rituals, values, and beliefs. This act of Indigenous love is a reminder of the need for justice and truth-telling as the only pathway forward in which we are all humanized and connected. It is only through truth-telling that there can be reconciliation.

Indigenous love as reclamation can be observed through everyday rituals like Cochiti’s form of prayer, which is woven into the children’s school life. With the guidance of an elder Pueblo teacher, children grow, prepare, and eat our ancestral foods in our ancestral ways as a means of reclaiming food sovereignty and the knowledge passed down from our ancestors. Preparing meals with traditional foods allows our elders to tell stories to the children about food, our beliefs, what we ingest, and why ancestral foods are good for our bodies.

Our elders, who are our most fluent Keres speakers, continually lead our language and culture lesson planning. These plans follow the cycle of our traditional, seasonal calendar, not the Western calendar, an act of reclaiming our ancestral understanding of time.

A beautiful example of the commitment of our elders is our Elementary Keres Language and Culture teacher who continues to develop the outdoor classroom, disrupting the settler colonial narrative that learning just happens inside the four walls of the school building. Our outdoor classroom embodies the ways in which we believe that schools are integrally connected to the whole-community—land, living beings, the elements.



Figure 2. Keres children’s learning center outdoor classroom

Lessons, resources, and activities in the outdoor classroom are available to the children and families who are enrolled in the school, as well as to the larger community. This is one way that KCLC demonstrates our commitment to preparing children for success and survivance in the way we define it: becoming whole people connected to land, rooted in our language, culture and values, so that we can all be loving, contributing members of our community. Jeremy Garcia (2020) speaks to the ways in which for Indigenous peoples, there

is a powerful connection to sustaining identity in relation to land, spiritual beings, symbols, and history that remind us of who continues to be affiliated with this landscape. It is where Indigenous peoples return to as a source of knowing, to offer prayers, and to reaffirm their identity. (p. 578)

Children can see all generations represented and respected in our school in the same way they are respected in our other communal spaces. KCLC is a place of healing for every member of the community, including the adults. In order for educational spaces to be liberatory, they must honor the contributions of each and every person. Central to KCLC's work is the belief that love has a place in our schools, in our classrooms, and in our organizational structure and climate each and every day. Because our elders, tribal leaders, have modeled to us—in the ways they speak gently, but firmly—the importance of what that love looks like in community and in our communal spaces.

RESTORING

When we imagine going forward, we dream of learning environments that put community and our values first. We dream of schools connected across generations through love. We know our children can be academically strong without sacrificing who they are. Post-COVID-19, the early childhood education we continue to imagine is marked by our children being able to access their heritage languages freely. We will continue to strive to realize early childhood education programs that can truly exercise educational sovereignty because they have access to state and federal funding without restrictions tied to mandated assessments that center English and whiteness. This funding rightfully belongs to Indigenous Nations, and the withholding of these funds is an act of further settler colonial aggression. Imagining racial justice and healing means reallocating these funds in ways that do not fragment our identities, deny our humanity, or compartmentalize our programs. This means moving beyond settler colonialist questions, such as: Are we a place-based school? An immersion school? A community-based school? A project-based school? The reality is KCLC is all of these things by virtue of our language. Our Keres language encompasses and integrates all these areas and beyond. This wholeness needs to be restored in early education policy, funding, and practices in the US.

As we continue living the legacy of the love of our ancestors through resistance, joy and the centering of Indigenous children and communities, we call on non-Indigenous educators to break with the past in hopes that post-pandemic, a Pedagogy of Indigenous Love will serve as a compass to American schools, enacting solidarity. It is with this hope that we offer some questions for reflection (Moquino & Kitchens, 2020) that can help non-Indigenous educators (re)consider how to show up in solidarity with Indigenous children, educators, families, and nations. Consider:

- How am I uplifting Indigenous people beyond an obligatory opening or closing statement? How have I failed to build relationships with Indigenous partners in the past? And how am I ensuring that Indigenous voices are involved?
- How have I taken responsibility to undo the miseducation that I have received about Indigenous peoples?

- What are the narratives that I've consumed, and how do they contribute to the invisibilization of Indigenous children?
- How have I actively contributed to the erasure of Indigenous children in my own classroom?
- How am I using financial privilege to redistribute resources to Indigenous-led organizations?
- How do I ensure that the national organizations I belong to are accountable and do not perpetuate the erasure of Indigenous peoples?
- Where am I investing my time, money, and other resources? Am I:
 - *Purchasing materials on Teachers Pay Teachers about Indigenous peoples made by non-Indigenous creators?*
 - *Buying books, materials, and attending workshops about Indigenous people with no presence of Indigenous peoples?*
 - *Participating in anti-racist workshops run solely by White individuals?*
 - *Centering myths, such as the Thanksgiving myth or the Columbus myth?*

IMAGINING POST-PANDEMIC PEDAGOGIES

As we educators envision ways of being and educating post-pandemic, we believe that American schools must strive toward culturally sustaining revitalizing pedagogy (CSRP) (McCarty & Lee, 2012). The Pedagogy of Indigenous Love at KCLC is one situated representation of CSRP. We know that this vision for early childhood education is possible and was possible, both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet the pandemic offers us the space to encourage educators in American schools to leave behind a settler colonialist agenda and move toward a Pedagogy of Indigenous Love. As we imagine pedagogies and schools post-pandemic, we invite educators to consider centering a Pedagogy of Indigenous Love in early childhood education via remembering, reclaiming, and restoring. This, we believe, will allow us to imagine education anew while attending to the harm and damage enacted by a past marked by the legacy of settler colonialism.

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Katie Kitchens (they/them/she/her) has worked in public, private, and non-profit Montessori environments for the past decade as an instructional coach, teacher trainer, and primary and elementary guide. Currently, Katie serves as the English-speaking elementary guide at Keres Children's Learning Center (KCLC) and is pursuing a PhD in educational studies, researching racial identity development in young White children. They strive to work in partnership to uproot racist ideology within themselves and their community, and work in coalition toward what Dr. Montessori called universal liberation.

Raising a Co-conspirator: A Letter to My Daughter

Abby Emerson

A letter for 10 years from now, when Melody turns 13.

July 18, 2020

Dear Melody,

You are turning 3 tomorrow. Just like the week you were born, there is a heat wave surging through New York City. This summer has brought about an immense increase in mainstream attention to racial justice. The movement for Black lives is seen on the nightly news and streaming through social media. There are reminders everywhere that, as much as we long for aspects of our pre-COVID lives, we cannot accept a return to them without change. As you start your next trip around the sun, this is the perfect moment to envision what parenting oriented towards racial justice can look like for you and for me.

Since you and I are white, we are in a privileged position where attending to race is seen as a choice. If I chose to, I could parent you from the shallow waters of race-evasiveness or let racial injustice lap at our ankles, but I seek to mother you with more intention and attention than that. Whether you call it critical race parenting (Delgado Bernal, 2018), ParentCrit (DePouw, 2018; Matias; 2016), or raising a co-conspirator (Love et al., unrecorded webinar, August 27, 2020), a central goal of my mothering is to disrupt racism.

Reading this letter, you are 13 now. As you transition from childhood into adolescence, I know that you will have a deeper awareness of race than I did at your age. As I envision what the next 10 years of your life will look like, I anticipate the important conversations we will have. While typically journey maps are for the past (Annamma, 2016), the one here is for the future. This is not to say that I am mapping your life before you have an opportunity to live it, but I am mapping some of the parenting decisions I will make so that you are better positioned in this world as a young, white anti-racist.

I am confident that you can look at this map and see that it rings true to your childhood experience. What will it mean for me to mother you in antiracist ways? How do I ensure that you are prepared to be a co-conspirator who seeks to make social change in whatever capacity you choose?

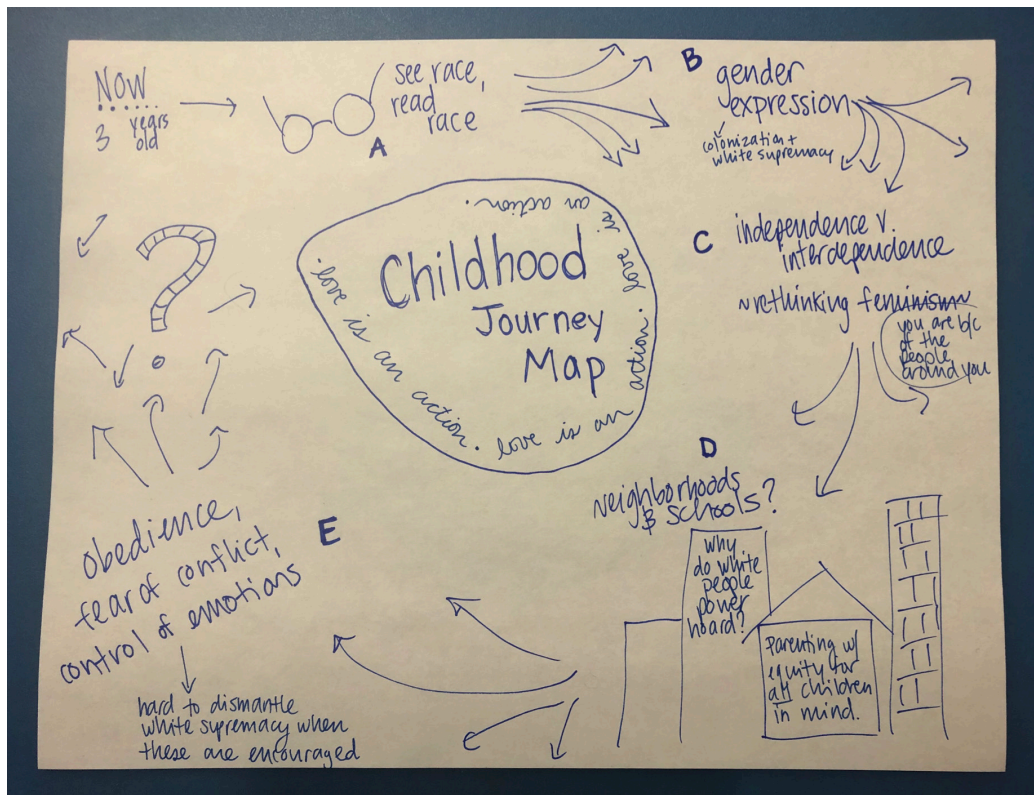


Figure 1. Childhood journey map

A) Seeing race, reading race. We have already started talking explicitly about race, and, as I'm sure you will discover, those conversations are only going to get more focused as you get older. There are no illusions of Colorblindness in our household (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). We use our racial literacy (Guinier, 2004) to read the world for the historical, legal, and social consequences of race. There is trepidation from some of my white parenting friends in bringing race up. Acknowledging whiteness and racialized power has become synonymous with being racist, but you will know better than that. How can you dismantle racist systems of oppression if you pretend not to see them? As I write this, you are just turning 3, but you are able to understand at a basic level that injustice often occurs along racial lines. There have been moments of misunderstanding, and, at times you overgeneralize in ways that are problematic, but those moments are only a problem when they are the only conversation being had. When it is one of many conversations, some of the pressure can come off.

Last week, we walked by a sidewalk vigil in Brooklyn. We talked about how someone had died, and the candles showed people's sadness and anger and other emotions people feel when they lose someone. You said, "white people will protest and make them feel better." Yikes. I am glad that you are familiar with protesting as a means of expression, but how troubling that even in that little voice of yours is such a large assertion of white saviorism. How striking that even at age 3, that is what you took away from our participation in protests for Black lives last month. There is so much more work to be done.

While race is a social construction, its entanglement with racism means that it deeply impacts people's lives—including ours (Fine & Weis, 1996). Over the next 10 years, we will not shy away from talking about race or the complicity of white people in racial domination (Leonardo, 2004). I'm sure at some points you

might get tired of these conversations, but I'll likely remind you how tiring it must be for people actually enduring racist discrimination. Most important, though, is that we do not just see and read race, but take action upon it. What moves will we take to dismantle white supremacy in your school? In our community? In our family? I look forward to your conspiratorship.

B) Rethinking obedience. Is 13-year-old you able to say “No!” as strongly as 3-year-old you? I hope so. These days, you are exerting yourself with defiance. My fear is that I will socialize that out of you. I fear I will mold you into someone who follows directions, does not make trouble, and is always self-contained. Dismantling white supremacy will be nearly impossible if you are concerned with keeping everyone around you happy. (I speak from experience on this.) Oftentimes, parents want children who are obedient, and I imagined my future children that way for much of my life. However, obedient children will avoid conflict at all costs, and working towards racial justice inherently engages in conflict (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). I hope that you and I have had a few conflicts over the years. Did we? Did we work through them, restoring our relationship and understandings of each other? Honestly, I cannot wait. Conflict is a natural part of being with other people, and, if that is not acknowledged, then we are not living truthfully or authentically (hooks, 2000).

C) Independence revisited. When I was 3, I told my parents that I was ready for them to move out. I would take my tricycle to preschool, of course. This story became family lore and a testament to how independent I was, am, and likely always will be. When you arrived three years ago, I was just on the cusp of rethinking independence. The version of feminism I had been familiar with was liberal, white, corporate feminism. It was a feminism that praised women for being brash bosses and celebrated fierce independence (Arruzza et al., 2019). However, I have spent the last three years evolving that weak version of feminism. The feminism I now gravitate towards, personally and as a parent, is that which emphasizes interdependence and community over independence. Black feminist conceptualizations are wider than simply of having access to men's opportunities, but, among other tenets, of understanding the power in mutual relationships (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; hooks, 2000; Lorde, 1984). I anticipate your childhood will be full of moments where we co-develop an even broader and deeper feminism. Of course, no matter what gender you ultimately identify as, I want you to be confident enough in yourself to be independent when you need to be. However, especially as a white person, independence should be understood as only one way to be, not the only way to be (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Independence should not be synonymous with trampling on others, perpetuating patriarchal ways of being.

This journey map is filled with arrows in many directions and ends with a question mark. I cannot predict what the next 10 years will hold for you, but I can commit to raising you as someone who is not only racially literate, but anti-racist. We will notice and problematize race. We will understand that conflict is natural and obedience must be thought of critically. We will build a richer version of feminism that emphasizes relationships and the humanity of others. Above all, we will take action. Our love for each other and the world will not simply be a feeling, but it will be the actions we take (hooks, 2000). Anti-racism, after all, is about taking actions against racism—systemic, institutional, and interpersonal (Kendi, 2019). The world right now in 2020 is in a huge state of transition. As many people in the world imagine a new way of living and being, I am imagining a more active, anti-racist way of educating and parenting you.

LOVE,

Mom

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Black Feminist Love: An Open Letter to My Children

Katie Harlan Eller

October 2020

Dear Sweet Ones,

It seems like yesterday I wrote another letter to you. It was the evening of November 9, 2016, and, like many in the United States, I was stunned and heavy hearted by the surprising results of the presidential election. One day, history books may describe the collective grief we awoke to after the winning candidate clinched the electoral vote despite open misogyny, racism, ableism, anti-immigrant rhetoric, and the promotion of policies fundamentally opposed to democracy. Such a public political paradigm felt wholly counter to the world I hope both of you know. In solidarity and grief, I shared a letter to you on Instagram, naming a continued commitment to working each day toward a more just world. I remember the one sense of relief I felt was not having to explain to you the implications of the election.

For you, it was just another Wednesday. I took you to preschool on my way to work. We drove our long commute home in time to have dinner with friends. Late that evening, you sang “Go, Tell It on the Mountain!” at the top of your lungs on the car ride home. As far as you knew, the world was full of music and joy and naptime and trail mix and friends. At that time, it was hard to imagine you, as 6-year-old twins, looking ahead to the next presidential election. Four fast years later, here we are. This letter is quite different. It is 2020, we live in a new state, you are first-graders, and you are fairly aware that it is election season. In the next couple of weeks, your dad and I will take you with us to the polls to cast our votes during a pandemic.

I’m writing this letter from upper Manhattan in a park near our home. Looking out at the Hudson River in autumn, I feel a breeze that welcomes long sleeves in sunshine. In this moment, I pause to notice the sight of succulents along a stone wall and brave oak trees in every direction. It is strikingly quiet for New York City, although I note the constant hum of cars nearby. It is a moment of beauty in a pandemic, a rare stillness while the weather welcomes me to relative safety outside.

Who would have predicted, in 2016, that we would become New Yorkers, moving to Manhattan just in time for COVID-19? Nearly as soon as we learned to navigate our new city, everything halted. In the last seven months, like millions of others, our family has known job and income loss, limited-space quarantines, kindergarten online, a summer without visits to family, school delays, and a positive COVID-19 diagnosis—all before first grade began. Add to our personal struggles the daily reminders of systemic injustice, education inequities, police brutality, protests, the murder of Breonna Taylor, the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and now a fraught presidential race. Every day, it seems, brings heartache, grief, and worry.

Still, like today’s view of the Hudson, there is so much beauty. You are reading. You’ve learned to ride your bikes without training wheels. You write books and hold dance parties and build Lego bakeries. You turn small moments into play with nothing more than your imaginations. You make us laugh and use new words and tell fantastic stories with earnestness and flair. You know we are in a pandemic, but you aren’t bound by it. While I face the uncertainty of days we didn’t imagine, you are teaching me, too. You are teaching me to love better.

About a year ago, I remember tucking you both into bed one night. You were in your new bunk bed, surrounded by your cozy lovies and stuffed toys. The sound machine soothed while the city sounds wafted in from Amsterdam Avenue. Gentle music from our beloved playlist flowed, like wind, throughout the room. As I started to back out of the room, one of you became inconsolably upset. I cannot remember what caused it, only that in that moment, you were unable to tell me what was wrong. You couldn't tell me what you needed, you didn't want me holding you, you were pushing me away, yet crying for help. I couldn't find the language that I thought I needed to build a bridge between us. Perhaps what you needed had nothing to do with words. I don't know, but I recall that you grew increasingly upset, while I grew increasingly frustrated at the helplessness we both were feeling.

Although I can't remember what caused your tears, I'm guessing that I was ready to move into the evening of a mom whose children are asleep: washing dishes, doing laundry, working, and preparing for a new day. So I left the room. What happened next remains utterly clear in my memory. I realized I had walked away from your pain. Looking back, moving away from you was a surrender. Maybe to you, maybe to the evening, maybe to our helplessness. Before I knew it, I succumbed to the aches of frustration and inadequacy. Then, a thought struck me:

What am I teaching my child? Am I only willing to be present with you when you are comfortable, calm, or can convey your need with words? Am I only present when you are in a state I know how to respond to?

By walking away, I was sending you a painful message.

When I think of this moment, it is loaded with shame, but I also know, now, how to name it. Perhaps, that night, I felt victim to a pervasive inadequacy: "enwhitened" love (Matias, 2016). Enwhitened conceptions of love, rooted in the idea that our emotions are structured in white supremacy, reflect feelings and affect over action. Caring and nurturing may be a "proxy" for love, but this is ultimately incomplete. hooks (2018), in *All About Love*, paints a portrait of Black feminist love in the womanist tradition, a conceptualization rooted in freedom, not control. When love is freedom, it is unafraid. It is honest. It is love without condition. It is not the casual platitude we call "unconditional love" that can be an empty promise: easily uttered, more difficult to enact. Instead, I'm learning to interrogate *what exactly* has become conditional.

I admit I didn't have to look far. Often, I have felt trapped by a sort of "if-then" approach to parenting: a defaulted, controlling approach that says: "if you'll do this, I will do this."

*"If you'll finish your meal, we will have more time to play."
"If you'll use your words, I can help you."*

Some of these if-thens can appear to be logical. One might ask, "But isn't it true that if the kids eat, they will have more time to play?" Perhaps. But I ask: To whom is it logical and why so? When you hear "if," what is the message? It has occurred to me since that night in the living room that the message of "if-then" is the *essence of condition*, a constant request to conform to my normed "if." hooks challenges this unequivocally. Black feminist conceptions of love exist without the "if." Love refuses "if" because it refuses fear. Love refuses fear of losing control. Love refuses fear of discomfort. Love even refuses the fear of inadequacy. Love is a sustained commitment to choose a person's freedom and to honor their wholeness completely.

Love refuses fear of discomfort. I have learned that white supremacy culture wants me to choose my personal comfort, effectively positioning myself above others by upholding if-thens. It wants me to value a “right to comfort” and a “fear of open conflict” (Jones & Okun, 2001). Unchecked, relationships might look like this:

“At all times, make yourself as comfortable as possible.”

“Walk away from confrontation. Require reasonableness.”

In other words, name conditions in order to give love. While I painfully confess my defaulted response to fear of inadequacy and frustration, I recognize that this isn’t real love, and I want you to know I am trying to love in a new and better way.

I am also learning that love without fear is love that is honest. In *All About Love*, hooks (2018) reminds us that we have been conditioned, from an early age, to choose comfort over honesty. A young child is chastised for naming an uncomfortable truth:

“That shirt is ugly.”

“I don’t like this food.”

In the response, the child is told some version of:

“Don’t say that. That truth is not acceptable.”

The resulting implication is: Truth brings pain. We must lie to keep those around us comfortable, perhaps because we believe this will keep *us* comfortable. But, my dear ones, please hear me: this is not integrity. If your conscience is misaligned with your outward action, it is not an integration of your whole self. If I lie for someone else’s comfort, I sacrifice my integrity. Indeed, conflict may increase through telling your truth. Pain may follow. Hear this, though: Your integrity is your freedom. It is an acknowledgment of your whole self. If you ever wish to tell me an uncomfortable truth, dear ones, here is something you can say to me:

“Love is truth.”

“Commitment to honesty is a commitment to loving and seeing each other as whole people.”

As I move toward hooks’s Black feminist love, I have, for now, one small idea. It seems a tiny root to plant in a forest of unlearning, but it is what I am carrying with me through the portal (Roy, 2020). In order to love in ways that honor your whole selves, I am abolishing every “if.” Instead of “if,” perhaps it is:

“Let’s make a plan for dinner and playtime. How shall we use our time today?”

“I’m here to help. I’ll sit close by as long as you need me.”

This is my commitment to you.

In the pandemic, I’ve carried a lot of fears, including all of the lasting repercussions of this season. Will your memory be of my working, separating myself from you to complete a task? Will you be tired of each other, of me, of yourselves? Will our physical boundaries from others impact our social wellness for ages to come? Will our increased togetherness bond us or break us?

But then, my loves, I remember that fear—while valid—cannot displace love. And within this view, I hold on to the possibility of the pandemic: that I worked on loving in ways that are conditionless and truthful and honor your whole selves. You have become stellar readers and innovative creators and have played with your many identities, growing towards the people you will be tomorrow. If you can do that, perhaps I can, too. Instead of remaining fearful that the pandemic will suppress our liberation, I wonder if we might flourish in this crucible.

One day, you will read this. I hope that you see how we leaned toward a better love that honors freedom: myself from the confines of comfortability and yourselves from any boundary that limits your whole self. I hope we will look back at this time and find that we emerged from the portal with more love and freedom than we carried into it.

Because love cannot coexist with fear, *real love is unafraid.*
Because love cannot withhold, *real love is generous.*
Because love cannot fear discomfort in tension,
 real love risks pain and isolation for truth.
Because love cannot fear a mistake and opt instead for silence,
 real love stumbles through trying.

In steadfast love and belief in you always,

Mommy

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Fighting For Justice in Education: How Schools Can Lead the Change Towards a More Equitable World

Tara Kirton

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine the world anew. This one is no different” (Roy, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has had tremendous implications for every aspect of life. School, work, celebrations, and everyday social interactions have all felt the repercussions of the pandemic. While the shutdown called for an immediate pivot from our daily ways of being, it has also offered opportunities for stillness and deep reflection. This moment of pause has provided a chance to think, speak, and *act* differently. As a parent my hope is that educators will lead the change.

FULLER NARRATIVES ARE A MUST

“Mommy, what are all of the people doing in front of the courthouse?” asked my 12-year-old son one morning last summer. “I think they’re holding signs,” said my younger son, while we looked across the street from our apartment. As I prepared to talk to my children about the scene unfolding, with protesters who had gathered to demand justice following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of law enforcement, I wondered how much they had processed about the racial unrest taking place nationwide. Candid conversations about race and racism were not new in our home. As a Black mother of two tween boys, I began talking about racial identity and topics around social justice with my children from the time that they were in preschool. I realized early on that I needed to instill a strong sense of racial pride to combat the continuous attacks on their humanity encountered on a daily basis through personal interactions and images in the media, and as a result of systemic racism woven throughout society. As I think about the pandemic as a gateway for imagining schools anew, I want schools to leave behind harmful practices that reduce children to stereotypes and embrace the idea of loving Black and Brown children while fully affirming their identities. I highlight the idea of affirming Black and Brown children intentionally because of the way schools have historically harmed them and denied their brilliance.

Roy (2020) compared the lockdown to a chemical experiment in the sense that each one managed to shine a light on hidden things. Illuminated were the incomplete narratives of people of Color and the potential for rethinking curriculum. First-person narratives are one of the core tenets of critical race theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT originated in the legal field, and it seeks to liberate marginalized groups through an examination of how racism functions systemically, rather than through isolated racist acts. It is important for schools and families to consider the historical context in which Black people are often highlighted in school curricula and to examine the partial history it purports.

Narratives regarding enslaved people are incomplete without the inclusion of discussions about chattel slavery and its impact on generations upon generations of Black families. Also often missing from history are the first-person narratives from the enslaved, which can provide meaningful context about the struggles and trauma that they were forced to endure. One cannot understand the stories of Black people and our country without understanding the origins of lynching, Jim Crow laws, white supremacy, and how the failures of the Reconstruction Era continue to impact our present day. Today, we see the effects of redlining and divestment in certain communities, and it is critical for children to understand the linkage from history to the inequities that we see today. It is essential to highlight the fact that Black

people were seen as property from the very beginning of our country's founding and each deemed to be three-fifths of a person. While this may be implied when teaching students about history, it is important to dig deeper to consider what it means to be seen as less than fully human, so we can begin to better understand how ideologies such as those do not disappear; they simply get repackaged. The new forms of slavery include the "cradle to prison pipeline" (Edelman, 2007), and we need to acknowledge that reality if we hope to create change.

All children should be able to see their identity represented from a historical perspective apart from that of struggle and oppression. Children should be provided with experiences that allow them to reach their full potential, guided by teachers who believe in them and are committed to helping them learn. Fuller narratives would allow Indigenous children to see their history apart from the story of Christopher Columbus. Asian students could see themselves as more than the myth of a "model minority," and Latinx students could embrace school experiences that aim to strengthen all of their abilities/capabilities. Black and Brown students deserve to see themselves and their ancestors highlighted in a rich display of greatness in their school curriculum. This should not be an occurrence that takes place occasionally. By providing a more inclusive curriculum, Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color can learn more about the accomplishments of their people and the untold ways they fought against oppression. Many families already provide this sort of education at home, but schools and families can create partnerships where this type of affirmation takes place in both locations. Some schools already implement curricula that affirm the identity of all children through anti-racist teaching or abolitionist teaching. As I imagine schools anew, curricula that affirm marginalized children will be the norm, not the exception.

JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

Schools need to look at their faculty and staff to examine the ways in which they interact with Black and Brown children. The work needs to begin with each of us thinking about our own biases and the intentional misinformation we were taught and are still being taught about people from different racial groups. hooks (1994) talks about the importance of critically reflecting on ourselves and our lives. Are some children praised while others are barely tolerated? Do teachers and administrators engage in or witness racist actions by colleagues and look the other way? Black and Brown children must feel seen, valued, and loved so they can feel safe and successful in school. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz states that educational equity begins with critical love (Resilient Educator Editorial Team, n.d.). She notes that most of our Brown and Black students are constantly given messages through media and elsewhere that they are not deserving of love and opportunities. Children need to know that they have advocates in school who will love them, stand up for them, and nurture all of their gifts.

As a Black parent, I want to see race and the history of racism included in the school curriculum along with math and other subjects. An omission of the full narrative of our history with race and racism is a failure to children everywhere. Ignoring our history does not make it less ugly. Fighting for justice in education means teachers and administrators will see the unique gifts in all children, including their Black and Brown students. According to Love (2020), "Abolitionism is not a social-justice trend. It is a way of life defined by commitment to working toward a humanity where no one is disposable, prisons no longer exist, being Black is not a crime, teachers have high expectations for Black and Brown children, and joy is seen as a foundation of learning" (para. 9). Critical love and a commitment to humanity for all people are key elements as we fight for justice.

Teachers and families need to have ongoing conversations about race and systemic racism, conversations that continue long past this period of social unrest. This is not a moment; it is a movement, and movements require continued support and attention. Baldwin (1962) once said, “nothing can be changed until it is faced” (final para.). I envision the work between schools and families taking place as a partnership throughout the year through workshops on racial identity and on disrupting racist practices. Psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum states that it is important for white people and people of Color in a race-conscious society to develop a positive racial/ethnic identity not based on the assumption of a hierarchy of superiority or inferiority (Parents League of New York, 2020). This lifelong process of developing positive identity often requires unlearning internalized misinformation about others and ourselves. Schools can be extremely helpful in supporting this process by providing curriculum that affirms Black and Brown children and helps them develop a strong and positive racial identity. Many schools offer an “All About Me” unit. As I imagine schools anew, I want to see schools include race in those units. A healthy racial identity can help marginalized children develop their self-esteem and provide a counternarrative that can empower them as they encounter racism.

If schools can offer workshops on child development, then schools can offer ongoing opportunities to help families and their faculty engage in conversations around race. In the workshops, families and faculty can work alongside each other to discuss race. Families and teachers can share language and exchange resources that will ultimately benefit the child as the child develops an understanding that it is normal to have questions and make observations about race and identity. Working with a professional who engages in anti-racist work will be important, as people are often fearful of saying the wrong thing when it comes to race. A professional in this field can help everyone navigate challenging moments by helping them to remain engaged and move through discomfort, and also to recognize how dis-ease often silences conversations around race.

In addition, creating a space for continued conversations around race and racism between the faculty and families sends a clear message that schools see the value in designating times for this work to take place. It also moves schools from a place of talking about an issue into a space of *doing* something about it. Many people feel that children are too young to talk about race, when the research proves otherwise. We know that children are constantly trying to make sense of the world, and that includes their efforts to make sense about racial identity. Children are bombarded with silent—and not so silent—messages about race and equity from birth, and they need places to unpack their questions. By equipping families and teachers with language and resources to help children make sense of race and develop an understanding of the history of racism, we are equipping them with tools to challenge racist practices. Finally, we cannot assume that families or schools have the right language to discuss race and racism, as many of us are still in the learning stages ourselves. It would be beneficial for us to do this work together and learn in community.

This is the time to rethink the world that we want to live in and the world that we want to leave behind for our children and their children. We all stand to lose out when false notions of superiority around race are upheld and reified. Bonilla-Silva (2017) reminds us that “change requires taking risks, saying things clearly, and being bold” (p. 253). As I think about my own children and the pivotal time that we all find ourselves in, I look ahead with tremendous hope. All children deserve a safe and equitable learning environment in which they can dream and thrive. Justice in education is within the reach of every teacher and administrator. I urge educators to take the first step in making that possibility a reality.

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Moving into a New Realm of Education and Parenting

Katherine Rodriguez-Agüero

This time is unlike any other. We—parents of school-aged children—have rethought our outlooks, educational systems, approaches to social-emotional well-being, and policies within school buildings. Families have experienced high levels of anxiety, stress, and distrust in school systems regarding safety and transparency, as well as in keeping their children’s needs first. We have witnessed a shift in educators and administrators approaching parents as doers, active participants in their children’s education. Although shortfalls exist, it is the approach parents take to ensure that our return to normalcy means more than going back to the identical routine. It is our mission to create a stronger, socially just system, one where families feel empowered to stand up for equity and fight for the educational benefit of their children.

One such way parents have innovatively supported their children is in the establishment of “pandemic pods.” As discussed on *All Things Considered*, pandemic pods are a place where students can safely interact with others and receive educational support from a qualified teaching professional to complete the necessary remote learning or to supplement learning (Shapiro, 2020). Students may remain with their classmates, close acquaintances, or friends, as parents split the costs of the private learning instructor. This system of pandemic pods demonstrates the resourcefulness parents have exhibited during this time.

The question remains: How has this also produced a new sense of equity? There have been discussions about how these pandemic pods can provide scholarship opportunities for students who cannot afford the costs. As a parent, this idea intrigued me, and although I did not take the jump toward it, I reflected on the comments of those who did. These pods create systems of familial community, acknowledging that it is acceptable for parents to collaborate, share stories of struggles, and discuss what allows their families to retain a sense of sanity. Thus, pods have created a space for not only parents, but also their children, to receive social-emotional support. Children can continue to have some experiences of sustained social relationships with their selected group of pod members, engaging in developmentally appropriate, safe, and hands-on activities.

As online learning rolled out, children and their parents who previously sought out their teachers for support in the classroom were now provided with their support virtually. They could sit and experience the lessons jointly. Most importantly, this shift has allowed us to move into a new realm of social justice education. One where we, the parents, are involved in the school’s decision-making process. For example, as my toddler entered her stage of remote learning, flexibility was key, and the opportunity to share with educators what worked best for her was crucial. Schools have taken the approach to seek out family feedback through surveys and orientation sessions. Success is seen within those schools where administrators enacted these actionable steps and seriously acknowledged parents’ considerations, making it not only a priority, but also a reality. Looking at this from a social justice perspective, it is important to recognize that not all parents can voice their opinion; there may be language barriers, cultural divides, or even a lack of technological support and resources. If this is the case, it is crucial for administrators to seek methods to equitably provide parents with supports; “leadership decisions, in this viewpoint, must be continuously reflected upon to analyze whose voices and ideas are privileged

and which individuals and agendas are silenced in order to make visible the political consequences that result” (Nicholson et al., 2020). It is refreshing when I am able to receive a school notification in a language other than English or with visuals. This acknowledges the communities’ needs and puts communications with families first.

As my daughter’s remote program began to roll out activities to do at home, it became clear that I needed resources not readily available. During the earlier part of Spring 2020, resources were scarce. There were few open department stores and limited internet delivery options, or sometimes none, which led families like mine to become outside-the-box thinkers. How could we engage and educate our children without these materials? Yes, this was a minor dilemma, yet it unleashed our innovative creativity. We invented new games and utilized at-home items to engage in play. Sofa cushions were stacked up to build forts, slides, and if you had a toddler like mine, the best hiding spot! Old boxes were recycled and made into cars, airplanes, and house structures for action figures. For a moment, we all needed to unleash our inner child. School administrators and educators, looking back at what happened during the spring of 2020, brought lessons learned forward to planning for the 2020–21 school year. Their mindsets had to account for families with internet difficulties, lack of technological support, multiple children who might use the same devices, and limited home resources. Certain schools prepared accordingly, providing materials for students, arranging pickup schedules, and engaging families in technology workshops before beginning remote learning. There has been evidence that these shifts are in the right direction, and that states that took these actionable steps and implemented these strategies may have prevented further learning loss (Harwin & Furuya, 2020). These shifts move schools into a new realm of familial outreach and education.

Another mindset families are leaving behind is “I don’t use technology.” In fact, this movement has taught them the importance of technological advances and support. Yes, there’s still room for improvement; however, compared to a year ago, parents have learned their way within this technological realm. At the same time, managing the balance between work and homelife, which sent many parents spiraling between deciding among in-person learning options, pandemic pods, or online instruction at home, has allowed parents to reconsider their priorities. Parents have grown to become advocates for their children and for ways they can obtain what their children need. Parczewska (2020) found that “The added value of home education is that parents rediscovered their children and children rediscovered their parent” (Results section, para. 3). Hence, the familial household environment has permanently shifted, as both adults and children recognize aspects of themselves they had previously ignored. Parents began to see education broadly, beyond the Common Core Standards; this includes children learning through participation in key activities, such as sports, artistic projects, or household chores like clearing the table, cooking, and caring for younger siblings or pets. In New York, standardized tests were placed on hold, and an alternative system for assessing students’ knowledge in an array of subject areas was created. Without the biased, one-sided assessments of standardized tests, students of Color and diverse learners are demonstrating the unique ways they learn materials. They’re excelling within their classes without the added pressures of those examinations. Educators, freed from having to focus on helping students pass and score highly on the tests were thereby able to shift their curricular approach and recognize students’ diverse learning styles.

Our newly found voice as parents has driven us to shift the education perspective toward a newer realm of family empowerment, socially just educational curricula, and innovative teaching practices. Students and their families now claim ownership over their schools’ next steps and educational supports,

becoming more powerful advocates than ever before. As we move into this new realm of education and parenting, we ask ourselves, how can we continue to grow and ensure that we remain empowered to have a voice regarding practices in schools in the years to come? The skills learned during this time reshaped our education system, including the roles of administrators, educators, families, and students. Pandemic pods are a new educational format. Technology use is part of our daily lives, whether for remote schooling or remote work. The familial system modified itself to the demands of this time period, bringing the members closer together. My daughter has the opportunity to stay at home, learn alongside her parents, and experience a unique teaching style. As a parent, I cannot help but wonder how these benefits will continue to level the field for diverse learners in the early childhood years. It also encourages me to look toward the future as we contemplate the steps taken to undo socially unjust educational practices.

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Schooling During the Pandemic: Children's Perspectives and Lived Experiences

This issue of the *Occasional Paper Series* is enriched by a collection of images, artwork, and photographed experiences from five child contributors who help us understand what it was like to be schooled during the pandemic. In the introduction of this issue, guest editor Mariana Souto-Manning writes:

... in addition to urging us to interrogate what and who might be part of a future that is more just and humane, more oriented toward freedom, the children remind us of the many ways humans can make meaning and be authors.

According to Souto-Manning, the children's contributions raise questions such as:

- How might we better attend to siblings and foster intergenerational learning opportunities?
- How might parents be repositioned in the ecology of teaching and learning after the pandemic?
- How might we re-orient schooling to an ethics of familism, collaboration, and interdependence?

Johana Protzel



"This is a drawing of three birds stacked on top of each other next to a flower that I painted because my teacher, Mrs. Kim, asked me to."

– Johana Protzel

"While we never would have dreamt that Jojo would be in a Korean dual-immersion kindergarten class remote for four-fifths of the school year and hybrid for the remaining one-fifth, we were blessed to watch her grow, see her produce beautiful art, and to learn alongside her. I've learned so much about Korean, kindergarten, and her creativity and am so grateful to her amazing team of educators."

– Betina Hsieh, mother of Johana Protzel

Sara Álvarez



Fiona Fong-Frederick



Amelia Martinez



Lela Joy Green Greaves



“Just because we’re magic, does not mean we’re not real”

– Jesse Williams, BET Awards Speech



Fearless, unstoppable
Courageous, invincible
We’re human, unshakable
Every girl’s a super girl ...

You’ve got a story, so don’t you worry
Say what you need to say
This is your chapter, happy ever after
Live every day that way

– Lyrics from “Every Girl’s a Super Girl” by JoJo Siwa



Your teachers
Are all around you.
All that you perceive,
All that you experience,
All that is given to you
or taken from you,
All that you love or hate,
need or fear
Will teach you—
if you will learn.

– Excerpt from *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler

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